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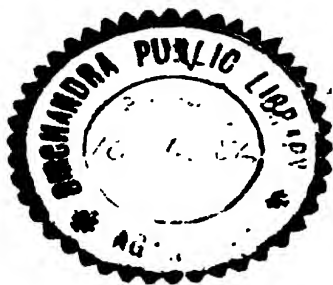
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FIRES AT FAIRLAWN

by
JOSEPHINE BELL



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I

FROM the very first the Seeleys were 'conversion-minded'. They told all their friends so.

'And what,' asked Margaret Seeley's rather pompous Uncle George, entertaining her to luncheon at the Athenæum Annexe, 'what does that mean?'

'It means we like big rooms, really,' Margaret answered, chasing a potted shrimp on to a piece of brown bread-and-butter.

'I told you the paté was easier to manage,' said her uncle.

'But I adore shrimps,' answered Margaret, 'when someone else has undone them for me. We like big rooms, she went on, 'but we can't afford to build a house with a room in, even if we could get a licence, and a piece of land with a lovely view. With the money we've got, we could buy a little box and climb about round the furniture, or we can buy an old-fashioned deserted mansion, with hundreds of rooms,—and convert.'

'Convert what?' asked her Uncle George, cautiously. He had heard that religious conversion was very fashionable, and he wanted to be sure of his ground.

'Convert the house into several,' answered his niece. 'Keeping the best bit for ourselves, and the view. All mansions have exquisite views, of course, which is why you can't find a decent plot of land with one now.'

Uncle George looked at her thoughtfully for several seconds. 'Who pays for the conversion?' he asked, 'if you can only just afford to buy your decayed mansion?'

'That's not fair,' said Margaret. 'You aren't supposed to ask awkward questions till Tom joins us for coffee. Tom did say something about a mortgage.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' said Uncle George, sternly.

Margaret hurriedly got out a sheaf of agents' particulars from her bag, and spreading them out in a fan, laid them on the table near him.

'Those are all possibles,' she said. 'But the ones I've drawn a skull on are a bit too decayed, and the ones with a crown are rather palatial; stars refer to the view.'

'Pity this three-starred one has a skull,' said Uncle George, startling the waitress, as she came to change their plates.

'Yes, isn't it? But the cellars there were awful; ferns all up the walls, and sprouting between the bars of the area windows. We rather bar cellars.'

'Glad to hear it,' said Uncle George.

'That's the most hopeful,' said Margaret, pointing to the one that lay uppermost. 'Though as a matter of fact it has a cellar. Quite remarkably dry, and not very big, and it wouldn't come into our part of the house.'

'But I don't see any stars.'

'Well, no. The view is not special. But there's just about as much garden as we can comfortably manage, when it's been split up into three. And the rooms are nice and big.'

'I see they are,' said Uncle George. 'And there appears to be about sixteen of them, all told.'

'Which makes about five each,' explained Margaret. 'Only it isn't quite like that. Actually, we want to cut off the kitchen premises complete, as a semi-detached house, and make the rest of the place into two flats, upstairs and ground-floor. The ground-floor will be the one for us, I expect. It will mean splitting up two of the reception rooms for bedrooms.'

'You seem to have gone quite a long way with your plans,' said Uncle George. 'Who is your architect?'

'We haven't got one yet,' answered Margaret. 'We think we may avoid it if we get a builder who understands conversions.'

'He probably has an even better understanding of how to make profits,' said Uncle George.

Margaret went on to describe her own views on how the chosen house could be made into three perfect dwellings. But Uncle George did not seem to follow her very well. He wanted to know why they had to go and live in the country at all, when Tom's work took him to the heart of London every day. And how they thought living would be cheaper there, when Tom would have such an expensive journey.

Margaret produced all the usual answers to these questions, and a few of her own. Her personal spending would be halved, she said.

'In London I have absolutely nothing to do in the afternoons now the children are away at school. I spend much too much on exhibitions and cinemas, simply because I'm bored. In the country I shall garden and keep hens and perhaps pigs and goats. I shan't be tempted to buy clothes in shop windows, because they won't be there, and anyway everyone will be shabby and tweedy. I expect I shall take to corduroy slacks and a cigarette hanging from the lower lip.'

'God forbid,' said Uncle George, looking really startled this time.

He insisted upon changing the conversation, until they moved away upstairs to find coffee. Here Tom joined them. He greeted his wife's uncle deferentially, but with courage. Uncle George waved him to a chair and went off to fetch a cup of coffee for him.

'Good temper?' asked Tom, when he was out of hearing.

'Moderate,' answered Margaret. 'But I'm afraid he guesses.'

There was no doubt of this when Uncle George came back with the coffee.

'Margaret tells me you think of converting some ramshackle old building into a block of modern flats,' he said.

‘Have you any idea, yet, approximately, how much that’ll cost me?’

This important conversation took place in April. By the middle of July the house, Fairlawn, became finally, with the help of large expensive amounts of Uncle George’s money, the property of the Seeleys. Uncle George had insisted on helping them to acquire the house, reserving their own money for the conversion. He said he would feel easier in his mind, that way. He knew the worst, whereas with conversions the worst so often grew from day to day, and month to month, until it became overwhelming. He advised them to keep a very tight hold on all that was done.

‘We shall,’ said Margaret. ‘We shall be on the spot.’

She insisted upon moving house before the end of July, in order to have her three boys there for the summer holidays. She felt she was making a wonderful sacrifice in giving up for this year any thought of going abroad, though in fact Tom had made this abstinence a condition of the move. He and Margaret settled into three of the ground-floor rooms. On arriving home from school each of the boys chose a bedroom upstairs to his liking, and set up there the furniture to which he was accustomed. As they were all widely separated this did not make for convenience, and there was a constant thunder as they charged up and down the uncarpeted stairs and passages to find one another. But at least it kept them exercised, and prevented any repining for their former home.

‘We can switch the rooms round when they’ve gone back to school,’ Margaret suggested. ‘Anything to stop their ridiculous homesickness for Hampstead. Their letters towards the end of term were quite absurdly sentimental.’

‘Do you imagine we shall start our scheme this year?’ Tom asked pityingly.

‘Shan’t we?’

‘We shall be lucky if we get the licence before next spring.’

‘Oh, surely! The housing shortage is still very much on. I thought it was easier than it used to be.’

‘It is. That’s why I said next spring.’

Since the date of this conversation was early in the September of 1950, and Tom’s forecast was at that time only too probably correct, the Seeleys settled down to a period of discomfort, inconvenience, improvisation, and intermittent bursts of rapture over living in the country, within so comparatively short a distance of Tom’s work. It took him only forty minutes in the train to reach Waterloo, and one hour from door to door to reach his office. He found the extra time he gained after breakfast for the cross-word puzzle a great saving of strain later in the day, when the mind was less fresh, and other matters had obtruded to prevent concentration. Margaret slowly cleared a wilderness of weeds from the neglected garden, discovering as she did so a great profusion of excellent plants, and some rare ones.

Her efforts did not go unnoticed. Two walls of the Fairlawn garden joined fields belonging to a farm, but the third divided it from the first of a row of plots, each with its small pseudo-Tudor cottage, and its neat beds of roses. In the one directly adjoining Fairlawn lived a retired Naval Commander and his wife. They lost no time in making Margaret’s acquaintance, and the Commander, who was a great gardener, began at an early stage to offer advice to her. She had not attempted to do more than weed the existing beds before the autumn arrived, the boys went back to school, and planning for the spring seemed to be called for.

Commander Howard, who was a short man, stood on his barrow, as it might be the bridge of his ship, and waved his arms, re-planning the garden of Fairlawn in a style that Margaret thought strangely exotic, until she remembered that his calling must have made him a much-travelled man, who no doubt had a wide knowledge of the trees and flowers of many lands. She made her usual complaint to him.

‘What I can’t understand is Miss Osgood leaving the house before she had sold it, and letting this lovely garden go to ruin as it has. She must have kept it beautifully, right up to last year.’

‘She certainly did. But she couldn’t stay on after her mother died.’

‘The house was hers, though. We bought it from her.’

‘Oh, it was hers all right. Only daughter, father died years ago. But I wasn’t surprised she cleared out almost at once. She was very keen on the garden, but she loathed the house. Used to grumble to Buffy, that’s my wife, nearly every day about it. How it was too big, and too cold and draughty, and cost too much to run. I bet it did, too. We rather wondered how you like it yourselves.’

‘We love it,’ said Margaret simply, with round innocent eyes, looking up at the Commander.

She would have liked to explain their plans, but Tom had ordered her to keep them to herself for the present, and she usually obeyed Tom in matters of business.

‘Apart from old Mrs Osgood dying suddenly like that,’ went on Commander Howard, ‘Miss Osgood had the offer of a smaller house at the other end of the village.’

‘Where she lives now, you mean?’ asked Margaret.

‘Bankside. Yes. About the only small house going in the place for years. They put up ours and the two next beyond it just before the war. There were meant to be two more, but they never materialised, and now there’s some talk of putting a new school there. God knows they need one, with the Council estate growing at the pace it is. Miss Osgood had her eye on the present vicarage at one time. I know, because she told me she could have it any time she wanted. But she was wrong there. The church authorities bought it for the vicar when the old one died and this new one, Drummond, came along. Nice chap. Have you met him?’

‘He called,’ said Margaret. ‘I thought he was very nice.’
Commander Howard got down from his barrow. His

face was now hidden by the wall, but his voice came over as brisk and clear as ever.

'Time I got back on the job,' he said. 'Hope you decide to cut out those banana-shaped beds. Too many of them. Pointless. Spoil the lawn.'

His face appeared again momentarily, suspended, as it were, in space.

'Bring your husband in for a drink on Saturday. Buffy hasn't met him yet.'

'Thank you,' said Margaret. 'We should love to come.'

The autumn buried Margaret's work in a thick blanket of wet brown leaves. Tom spoke in general terms of getting a gardener for the spring.

'Now would be more to the point,' said Margaret. 'To do all the digging, when it isn't actually raining.'

'Have you been taking orders from Howard again?'

'No. Common-sense this time. I don't mind clearing up the flower beds, but if you want any home-grown vegetables next year, we ought to have a gardener, *now*. One day a week will be enough.'

'For this vast kitchen-garden?'

'For the piece of kitchen-garden that will go with our new flat. How's the licence?'

'Sunk without trace.'

'Not really?'

'I don't suppose so. Saunders and Co. seem to think their Mr Green is pulling gently at strings in the background.'

'Do you suppose Saunders and Co. are right, or merely loyal?'

'How should I know? They are the only builders within miles of here that your Uncle George would approve of. He said they are reasonably honest. Not that we are obliged to take his advice, since we are doing the conversion with our own money.'

'It would be tactful. Also he's always right about that sort of thing.'

'True. Cheer up, darling. We couldn't start the conversion in the winter, licence or no licence.'

Margaret was silent for a time. Then she said, 'Perhaps Mrs Holbrook would know of a gardener.'

'Or just one who digs.'

'No. I want a proper gardener. After the conversion . . .'

They sat quietly planning the glories to come. Life was geared now to the conversion. It was the sunshine at the end of the long tunnel of winter. It was the glistening mountain-top, the peaceful harbour. It was the future.

Meanwhile an average English winter was upon them, in a country climate much colder than that of the London they had left, and in their fantastic country home no central heating, and long bare passages and stairs. They took to having all their meals in the distant kitchen, because the food would not stay hot on the journey to the all-purpose sitting room, and also because the kitchen, having the large old-fashioned Ideal boiler in it, was the only warm room in the whole house.

The Christmas holidays passed in a welter of mud and soaking gum boots. After the Seeley boys went back to their schools again Margaret was preoccupied for a week or so cleaning up the remains of their incursion. After that, snow took the place of mud, with results that were quite as dirty, and much wetter. Soaking gum boots again stood in the corner of the outer hall, this time surrounded by a small lake of melted snow.

Through all these trials Margaret's flagging morale was continuously upheld by her new daily woman, Mrs Holbrook. The latter's general attitude to life was fatalistic rather than defeatist. She took everything for granted, particularly the weather. Her quiet, sad refrain, 'It was only to be expected,' drove Margaret to such lengths of compensatory rebellion and defiance that Tom found himself astonished at a heroism and endurance he had never thought her capable of showing, much less sustaining, through seven long weeks of hardship. He decided that

the country was proving just the thing for her. As for himself, the brisk battle to and from the station gave him welcome exercise, and the rest of his day was unaltered. True, the house was an ice-box, except for the small area round the sitting room fire, and the boiler-heated kitchen. But all that would be put right for next winter—after the conversion.

Meanwhile the matter still hung fire. The snow prevented Mr Green from 'measuring up'; without his figures the detailed plans could not be produced for the Council, and the licence could not be given until the plans were passed.

After the snow melted and the rivers of slush subsided, a drying and bitter wind from the east cemented the flower beds and the drives. Margaret decided, as gardening was out of the question, to arrange a day in London with some of her old friends there. The next morning Mrs Holbrook looked at her sadly.

'Mr Green called yesterday, Mrs Seeley. It was to be expected he'd come with the first of the dry. He did what he could, but of course I didn't have the keys to let him into the cellar, so he couldn't do much. It was the cellar he wanted to measure up, for the foundations, and to see the meters and that.'

'Oh bother,' said Margaret, swallowing a more forceful expression. 'I'd better put all the keys where you can find them. I forgot I hadn't unlocked the cellar since the boys went back.'

She had kept them out of it because they had begun to use its window as a short cut from the garden to the back stairs.

'Mr Green said he was sorry to miss you,' went on Mrs Holbrook evenly, 'as he was exceptionally busy just now, and couldn't say when he'd be able to call again. It's to be expected they'd be run off their feet with the spring coming.'

'If you can see it in the distance you have better eyes than I have,' said Margaret crossly.

'It isn't the sight so much,' answered Mrs Holbrook unmoved, 'as the smell. I thought I smelled it in the air yesterday, but it's not so noticeable this morning.'

Tom rang up Mr Green that evening and promised him that he would be able to have access to the whole property at any time on any day. Mr Green said he would try to look round again in a day or two. In about three weeks after this the plans were drawn up and sent to the Council. That was at the end of February.

Early in May the licence seemed imminent. Mr Green rang up Margaret one morning.

'We've got it in the bag, I think,' he said cheerfully. 'I'd like to get cracking the week after next, if that's convenient.'

'How marvellous!' said Margaret. 'Next week if you like.'

Mr Green laughed.

'Well, no. It'll have to be the week after. Make no difference in the end, you know. The better the weather the quicker we can get on with it. I want to get you fixed up in your part during the best of the summer. Then we can get on with the empty wing to suit ourselves.'

'How long will the whole thing take?' asked Margaret, with anxious misgiving.

'I wouldn't like to say exactly,' answered Mr Green, 'But we'll do our best for you.'

'He better had,' said Tom, when he heard Margaret's report that evening.

Mrs Holbrook was not disturbed at the prospect of having the builders in. She had known of the conversion ever since she came to work at Fairlawn, and she approved of it as a future benefit to herself.

'It was only to be expected you wouldn't want a place like this, nowadays,' she said. 'I worked here for Miss Osgood the last three years. I never saw so much furniture in all my born days, as they had. Stacked with it to

the roof, it was. Every room, just as it had been in Mrs Osgood's mother-in-law's time. She was married in the Army in India and her husband was killed out there on the frontier, as they called it. She came back with Miss Laura, that's Miss Osgood, and lived with the old people till they died. Then the house came to her. Mind you, I had all this from my own mother. Miss Laura, only no one ever calls her that now, not knowing her young as my mother did. Miss Osgood asked me to oblige her when the cook and housemaid both left in the war and there was no more maids to be got for love or money. Well, I was glad to do it, my own husband being in the Army, and two children, both under five, and you know what Army allowances are. So I stayed.'

'It would be a big house to run with two maids,' said Margaret.

'They had three in the old days. According to my mother,' replied Mrs Holbrook. 'With extra help in the kitchen when there was visitors or parties.'

'I wonder Mrs Osgood stayed on after the war,' said Margaret.

'They used to say it would kill her to move,' answered Mrs Holbrook. 'She suffered from her heart the last five years. Never went upstairs the whole of the time.'

'We shan't have stairs ourselves when the building is done,' said Margaret. 'We're going to have the ground-floor flat, and let the top-floor one and the semi-detached part. We shall have to move ourselves into the kitchen end of the house before they start next week.'

Tom and Margaret moved furniture in the evening, and Mrs Holbrook cleaned up and cleared away in the morning. The boys' rooms were left at present because they were in the part of the house that would be dealt with later.

Margaret and Mrs Holbrook went through the empty ground-floor rooms, shutting the windows and fastening them.

'You'd never hear at the other end if someone was to come in,' said Mrs Holbrook. 'The whole place knows Saunders are making a start Monday. It's only to be expected the young boys will be coming round to have a look: inquisitive young monkeys.'

She let Margaret fasten the windows in the room they had used as their bedroom, and would be using again for that purpose later on. She stood in the doorway, composed and aloof.

'This was the study, one time,' she said. 'Then Mrs Osgood had it when they wouldn't let her go upstairs any more. I wouldn't fancy it to sleep in, myself.'

'Why not?' asked Margaret.

'Seeing she died here.'

'Oh,' Margaret did not want to give offence by denying superstition. She hesitated. 'I didn't actually know that. But I don't think I mind. I mean, when elderly people die it seems quite natural, doesn't it? Hearts just wear out, I suppose.'

'It wasn't her heart,' said Mrs Holbrook. 'Didn't none of them tell you she was burned to death? In this very room.'

Margaret was shocked, startled, unbelieving.

'A fire! We never heard anything about it. The surveyor would surely have said . . . How much damage . . . ? I don't understand.'

'A fire,' repeated Mrs Holbrook severely, 'in this very room. Burned to death in her invalid chair before anyone could save her.'

'How absolutely frightful! How did it happen? I suppose she got her clothes alight, or something? Or did she fall in the fire?'

'They brought it in an accident,' said Mrs Holbrook, 'at the inquest.'

'No wonder Miss Osgood has never told us. I'm rather surprised the Howards didn't speak of it, though. Miss Osgood often says "after mother died", when we discuss things about the house and our plans. But she never says

anything more. I'm not surprised, now I know. What a ghastly thing to happen!'

'It was an accident,' repeated Mrs Holbrook, with unnecessary emphasis. And then, as they left the room together, she added, quite casually, 'So they say.'

II

AT the time, and remembering it some weeks later, Margaret Seeley felt a little shiver of fright run through her at Mrs Holbrook's careful innuendo. But her general excitement, over the week-end before the conversion began, prevented her from mentioning it to Tom. She quite forgot the Osgoods in her delight at the start of operations.

'It's just as well we moved up here,' said Tom, on the first morning, coming back from his bath.

'Why?' asked Margaret, dully.

She was dressed, but her mind never functioned very clearly until she had reached her second cup of breakfast coffee.

'I went down to poke the Ideal, as usual, and ran into three types hanging their coats up in the kitchen.'

'Our kitchen?'

'*The* kitchen, until they make us our new one. It was all very well, being me, and I happened to have my pyjamas on for once, having remembered the Ideal before I ran my bath, and not immediately after I'd got into it. But it wouldn't have looked so good if it had been you in your nylon nightie.'

'It would have looked much better,' said Margaret, complacently.

'They would have packed up and walked out on us,' said Tom. 'Wait till you've met them.'

'I'm going down now,' said Margaret. 'Shall I apologise for your intrusion?'

'No. They were very civil. They said they'd find another empty room. I told them that would be quite easy.'

They asked if they could boil a kettle on our stove a bit later on.'

'Of course,' said Margaret. 'We couldn't grudge them a kettle.'

She had the kitchen to herself while she got breakfast, and also later, having seen Tom off at the back door, while she cleared away and washed up. A welcome sound of blows delivered at brickwork, and the cracking of splintered wood, began punctually at eight o'clock. The Seeleys, upon hearing the first knock resound through the echoing emptiness of the ground floor, had clasped hands across the kitchen table, regarding one another with shining eyes. Now, as she worked, Margaret sang a little song to herself in praise of workmen.

At half-past nine, however, when she had finished her sweeping and dusting and bedmaking upstairs, she heard her name called from below, and went down to see what was wanted.

'Can I boil a kettle, mam?' asked a broad-shouldered, dark-faced man, in a white singlet and dust-powdered grey flannels.

'You can indeed,' said Margaret, hurrying to the stove.

She was pleased to see that the builder's man carried his own teapot, a large, battered, metal affair, and to notice, as he put it down with the lid off, that it already held about a quarter of a pound of fresh tea-leaves. Her largest kettle, she decided, would be needed to fill such a pot. She lit the gas under it, and then went away to write out her shopping list for that morning.

She was making up her face when she realised that silence had fallen on the house. Looking at her watch, she saw that the time was a quarter to ten.

'They must have breaks,' she said to herself, 'but it does seem a pity. It sounded so beautifully *busy* before.'

Taking up her bag and shopping basket she went downstairs again, and along the kitchen passage to the main hall. Something had happened already. The floor boards

were up in a narrow line along the whole length of the hall from the front door, while high on one wall, from which the wallpaper had been stripped, a few bricks had been cut out, forming a small hole.

Somewhere off the hall she heard a low murmur of voices, jerky and intermittent. The tea-break was on.

'It's a start,' she told herself. 'I mustn't be impatient.'

When she came back from the shops the hammering and trampling were in full swing again. She found that sacks had been pinned up across the kitchen passage, where it joined the hall. This, it was explained to her, was to prevent cement and brick dust from seeping too easily into the rest of the house. But looking at the surface of the kitchen table she saw that seeping had already taken place on a large scale.

'You'll have plenty of this sort of thing before you're finished,' the electrician told her. She knew him already, as he had a shop in the neighbouring town where she did her more important shopping.

'I didn't know you took on builders' jobs, Mr Stokes,' said Margaret, happily. The electricity would be a success, at least.

'It's the biggest part of our business,' replied Mr Stokes. He had a large-scale plan in his hand, and was alternately looking at it and staring about him. 'Three separate establishments, I understand, with three separate meters.'

'Yes,' said Margaret, apologetically.

'I'll have to re-wire you completely,' said Mr Stokes. 'But it wanted doing. In fact, the old wiring is so bad it was getting risky from the insurance point of view.'

'Fire,' said Margaret quickly. 'That wasn't the cause . . . ?'

She stopped, but Mr Stokes understood her.

'You're thinking of old Mrs Osgood's accident,' he said. 'No. That was a gas fire she had in her room. Now, if you've a minute or two to spare, I'd like to go over these

power points with you. And there's a query here about strip lighting.'

Feeling important and business-like, Margaret walked through all the rooms of the house with Mr Stokes, discussing the electrical arrangements. In the smallest of the ground-floor rooms they found the builders' encampment. Three coats hung from an obsolete lamp bracket. Against one wall some empty paint drums supported a long plank, forming a convenient bench. Another cluster of drums, topped by a piece of skirting board, torn out by Mr Stokes's assistant, in his pursuit of electrical wires, made a table. The capacious teapot stood on this, surrounded by four cups.

'You must ask for anything you need,' said Margaret, eagerly.

But she thought they had settled in very comfortably already, and her heart rose in rejoicing at the sound of blows struck in purposeful rhythm.

A silence lasting an hour fell on the house between twelve o'clock and one. A short silence cut into the busy sounds at three o'clock. At a quarter past five the knocking was over for the day, and at half-past the bricklayer and his tea-making mate set off down the drive together on their bicycles. Mr Stokes and his assistant, who had come at eight, left punctually at five. Margaret had the house to herself again.

When Tom came in an hour later he was unimpressed.

'Not much to show for a whole day,' he said, in a disappointed tone.

He was standing in the hall, gazing at a narrow gap in the brickwork of the wall just above the level of his head. A strong wooden beam had been laid in the gap and cemented on where it overlaid the supporting bricks. 'What's the point of this, anyway?'

'It's a doorway,' explained Margaret. 'That's the lintel. To-morrow or the next day Alf is going to knock out the bricks below it.'

'Who is Alf?'

'The head bricklayer. Foreman of the lot, I think. Really, they worked very hard considering the interruptions.'

'What interruptions?'

'The tea-breaks. And lunch. Fred had to boil the kettle three times altogether.'

'Does he do anything else?'

'He sweeps away the mess Alf makes. When they begin to build the partition walls he will bring in the breeze blocks. A lorry is due to bring some to-morrow. I expect he'll help to unload it if it does.'

'Busy chap,' said Tom. 'Did anything else happen to-day?'

'Oh, yes. A lot of electrical work,' said Margaret eagerly. 'Mr Stokes went over the whole set-up with me, and they took up all the floor boards in the hall, and began sorting it out. They put the boards back temporarily, so that we shouldn't fall down the holes to-night.'

Tom nodded, looking up at Alf's beam and the rough gap below it. 'It's a start,' he said, hopefully.

It was a week of fine dry weather; builders' weather, as Fred told Margaret, while he stood by the kitchen stove boiling the kettle for the tea.

The first doorway was completed, the breeze blocks arrived only one day late, and a dividing wall began to grow across the large ground-floor room that had been Mrs Osgood's last dwelling-place. This wall left the fireplace in the larger part, which overlooked the garden, and was to be the Seeleys' own bedroom. The smaller part would have an electrical wall fire and a ventilator, and would make a bedroom for one of the boys. It already had one window, and now it had its new door.

The Seeleys walked about in their two new rooms every evening, arranging imaginary furniture by argument. On the first day of the partition they could look at one another over the top; the next day it was nearly complete and they could only shout remarks to one another about the furni-

ture and about the two pleasant rooms they had got out of one rather dreary one

By the end of the week Margaret was on friendly terms with all the workmen but conversation was limited, except with Alf, who was a true craftsman, proud of his skill, and also a local inhabitant, as was his mate, Fred. They kept a polite, but marked distance from Mr Stokes and the other electrician, who both lived in the neighbouring town. Alf was deriving a very special satisfaction from his work at Lamlawn. He began to hint at it from the first.

'This ud give Mrs Osgood a heart attack, all right,' he said on the day he completed the first partition wall. 'She was that struck on the old house she could hardly bear to have repairs done when they was needed. In case the tiles didn't match or the bricks was a different size. All sorts of silly ideas she had.'

'Odd of her,' said Margaret. 'It isn't a really old house and the architecture is nothing very special. I mean, it wouldn't have much chance of getting taken over by the National Trust or anything of that sort.'

She thought a lot of herself and her family,' answered Alf. 'Been Osgoods in Shipworth for generations. Farmers in the old days. You can tell by the grave stones. But they give up farming over a hundred years ago, my old mother used to say and she worked for 'em now and then. But me in wasn't the word for it. They'd pile up the fruit and that at the church for the Harvest Festival. But give it away to them as would have been glad of it? Oh no. Even their own friends had to buy it off of them.'

'Were they considered well off?' asked Margaret. 'I mean, it sounds as if they had come down in the world a bit.'

She did not want to discuss Miss Osgood with a local villager, but she could not help remembering the former's shabby tweeds and old mackintosh, always the same outfit through the whole winter and the faded cotton dresses and shapeless cardigan of her present wear.

'First World War,' said Alf, shortly. 'Old Mr Osgood, that was Mrs Osgood's father-in-law, died at the end of it, after his only grandson, her boy, was killed. She was a widow, living with her husband's parents. I was a nipper then; I don't remember much of it. But my mother used to say they lost the heir and they lost the money, abroad, both. And Mrs Osgood felt the money most.'

'She doesn't sound very nice,' said Margaret. 'Poor Miss Osgood must have had rather a hard time of it, looking after her.'

'A saint on earth, my mother used to say,' Alf answered. 'There isn't many would have stuck it the way she did.'

Margaret nodded. She had learned from several sources of Miss Osgood's courage and devotion, and though she felt in no way drawn to the faded dowdy little person she met about the village, and in the shops, who always greeted her politely, she was quite ready to admire her proved worth.

Nevertheless it became an established joke between herself and Alf that each new part of the conversion, each fresh desecration of the sacred rooms of Fairlawn, was another little slice of 'getting his own back on the old girl.'

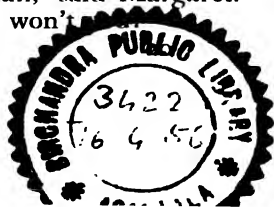
'Why is he so bitter against her?' asked Tom, curiously. 'I think half of it is joking, and half memories of his boyhood. But he hasn't told me of any special crime she caught him at.'

The builders went on with their work, though with interruptions and delays. Alf and Fred were suddenly withdrawn for a whole week because the electricians had not finished the wiring in the room they wanted to attack next. But by the end of June they were back again, and the electricians had finished their job.

'Then we shan't be seeing you again?' said Margaret, taking leave of Mr Stokes.

'No. Unless you have fittings you want us to fix for you.'

'I expect I shall,' said Margaret. 'And you'll have to bring the meter, won't



'No. The Board'll do that. Any day now, they said. I could have shown them, but I expect they'll work it out.'

'No more floor-traps, anyway,' said Margaret.

'Not until the gas bring their new main in,' answered Mr Stokes. 'And the water. I believe you're having separate mains up from the drive, for the two flats, and leave the old one for the maisonette.'

'Yes, I believe we are.'

'When you want your light fittings fixed,' said Mr Stokes, more formally, producing a business card, 'just give me a tinkle.'

'Thank you,' said Margaret.

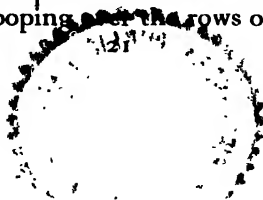
She was glad one operation, at least, was now completed, but the talk of mains opened new vistas of work ahead, not even begun. And by now the sound of hammering had begun to pall. Such a lot of hammering to produce so little result. She did not know which she disliked more; the monotonous but penetrating sound of blows, or the deathly silence of the tea-breaks, when she knew that progress had stopped.

During this third week of the conversion she spent much time in the garden, picking the abundant crop of gooseberries. There were far too many of them. Even if she bottled or made jam, two people could never eat the rest before they dropped off the bushes. At the end of the week she put a large basket of the fruit in the 'Retiring Room', as Tom called it. When she heard the men going there on Friday evening, to get their coats, she followed them.

'I thought you might like to take some off my hands,' she said. 'We don't know how to cope with them all, with the boys away.'

She was thanked profusely by the four men present. Alf and Fred had that day been augmented by two plasterers, who had been busy slapping away at both sides of the partition walls. She smiled at them all and went back into the garden to gather spinach for Tom's dinner.

While she was stooping over the rows of leaves she heard



footsteps, and standing upright, saw Alf on the path near her, leaning on his bicycle.

'I thought I'd like to say, mam, what a change it was you bringing the stuff in the way you did. Nothing of that sort in the old woman's time, believe me.'

Margaret laughed, though she felt the joke had really been flogged to death by now.

'It was no laughing matter at the time,' said Alf, with a serious face.

'What wasn't?'

'Well, we was only lads, and her plum trees had branches over the wall into the fields there. She cut them off after it.'

'After what?'

'The row. We only took what was hanging over. We'd always done it. But she set the constable on to watching us, and it was nearly a court case, only Vicar—not Mr Drummond, the one before him—he wouldn't let her do it. It was settled out of court, and we had to pay the value of the fruit. That lost me my chance of going in the stables at the Manor House. I never forgave her for that. My father wanted me in the building trade like himself, but I was mad struck on horses, and I could have got a start if it hadn't been for her. As it was I had to go apprentice in the brick-laying, and I never left it.'

'I'm sure you are a born brick-layer,' said Margaret. 'Look at those lovely new brick fireplaces you've made me.'

Alf flushed with pleasure.

'I expect you ought to be grateful to her,' Margaret went on, 'for saving you for the building trade. You might not have got on so well in the stables.'

'It broke my heart giving it up,' said Alf stubbornly. 'She knew she'd a lot to answer for when she came to her end. It was a judgement on her.'

'A judgement?'

'I reckon it was, too.'

'Do you mean her accident?'

'That's right. In my opinion that warn't an accident.'

It were a judgement. For all the wrong things she'd done.'

'Oh, surely!' cried Margaret. 'Things don't happen like that.'

'I reckon there's times that they do. You ask Mrs Holbrook. She comes to you now, don't she? Ask her if it weren't a judgement. She knows.'

III

ON the Saturday of the following week Tom and Margaret attended a small drink party given by the Howards. It had been described as small in the invitation written in Buffy's sprawling handwriting. In actual fact the Howards' house when they arrived was packed with guests, among whom they found themselves the centre of a general curiosity.

'What *are* you doing to Fairlawn?' was the universal approach, and 'converting' was not taken as a sufficient answer.

At the end of the first hour Tom and Margaret had worked round to one another again in a corner of the small drawing room.

'You look hot,' said Margaret, unnecessarily.

'So would you in a collar and tie and jacket with one cubic foot of air to breathe. Why don't we all move into the garden? It's a marvellous evening.'

'It was raining all day. The grass must be soaking. Have one of these.'

Margaret indicated a plate of small pastry biscuits, each decorated with a slice of smoked salmon.

'Buffy has done us particularly well,' said Tom, finishing one at a mouthful and picking up another.

'She always does. Not only parties, either. Look at that dress. I saw it in the window of the most expensive of the small dress shops in Oldford the other week. I nearly bought it myself—until they told me the price.'

'Perhaps they've had a Sale since then.'

'They have. But that isn't the sort of dress you put into a Sale. I asked about that, naturally.'

'Well, perhaps she splashes a bit on parties and feeds Bill gruel the rest of the time.'

'If she does he thrives on it amazingly.'

'Hush. We oughtn't to discuss them in their own house.'

'We ought to move round a bit. If only they wouldn't keep harping on the conversion. You've finished the whole plateful! Greedy hog!'

'Hullo, Margaret! You mean Tom, I hope.'

'Of course I mean Tom. I can't move him, Bill. Buffy's cats have a greater hold than me.'

'I. Greater hold than I. Yes, my wife is very accomplished, though I say it as shouldn't.'

'Who. Who shouldn't.'

'All right. I apologise. The vicar wants to talk to you, Margaret. He is worried about something to do with Fairlawn.'

'What business has he to worry about Fairlawn?'

'I wouldn't know. But please be kind to him.'

'Of course I will. I like Mr Drummond.'

Margaret squeezed her way past a quartet all shouting at the tops of their voices. When she had disappeared, Bill turned to Tom Seeley.

'There seems to be considerable disapproval of your activities at Fairlawn,' he said. 'Surprises me, really. I should have thought the more people we have here the better. There isn't an overwhelming choice of acquaintances here at present.'

'Haven't you been here long?' asked Tom.

Somehow he and Margaret had thought of the Howards as very old inhabitants.

'A couple of years.'

'Only that? I didn't realise . . .'

'I've only been retired a couple of years,' said the Commander, stiffly.

'Oh, I see. Yes, I suppose so.'

Tom did not know what to say. He turned the conversation back to its beginning.

'Why don't people like our splitting up Fairlawn?'

'They say it's going to spoil the character of the village.'

'Oh, rot! That was spoiled ages ago, when the railway came, I should say. Certainly when the suburban houses in Station Road went up. It must have been largely dormitory since the twenties, I should think.'

'So should I. More than half the men here go up to town to their work every day.'

'They certainly do. I'm with them. But I'm sorry their rural susceptibilities are hurt. I don't quite see what I can do about it.'

'They'll live it down.'

Meanwhile Margaret had found the vicar and his wife very comfortably seated in a place of honour on the sofa, which had been pulled aside, flat to the wall, under an open window. They made room for her between them and she was immediately supplied with a fresh drink by Buffy, who was standing nearby.

'I did have a glass,' said Margaret vaguely, looking towards the corner she had left.

'Never mind. Take this. We must get all the glasses emptied. If Bill goes round afterwards drinking the leftovers it has a perfectly deadly effect on him.'

'I'm not surprised.'

'The same applies to these,' said Buffy, handing a plate of stuffed olives.

'I couldn't. I've had too many already. Did you make all these wonderful things yourself?'

'Heavens, no. I'm not nearly clever enough.'

Buffy moved away, her blue taffeta dress swirling about her as she moved, her fair hair shining among the dark suits of the men. Margaret and her companions watched her in silence. They were all thinking the same thing. How did Commander Howard put up with his wife's extravagance? How did he manage at all on his retired pay? Private means, they supposed. There did not seem to be any other answer.

Margaret's thoughts had travelled far when the vicar next spoke. She pulled herself together to listen.

'I hope you won't think me very interfering,' he said. 'But I wanted to ask you one or two things about your alterations, if I may?'

'Of course you may,' answered Margaret.

There was a pause, during which it was obvious that the vicar did not know how to begin.

'Oh, get it out, Lionel,' said his wife, impatiently. She was a thin woman, with a high forehead and hair pulled down smoothly over each ear, and held in place by combs. At the back of her head the hair fell straight and limp to her neck, indistinguishable from that of most young men of the day.

'It is not easy to know how to begin,' said her husband, mildly.

'I should have thought it was much easier to begin than to go on,' replied Mrs Drummond.

Margaret waited patiently for this cryptic exchange to end. As nothing seemed to come of it she said helpfully. 'We really are beginning to make progress. The divisions are all up in the downstairs rooms where we are going to have our flat, and we hope to have the plumbers along soon when the Council have put in the new main for the water. Even if they don't come next week we shall be getting on with the upstairs flat. The rooms are going to be divided just the same as ours.'

'That leads to what I wanted to ask you,' said Mr Drummond, gratefully. 'Are the flats to be self-contained? I mean, will you have a separate front door, or share the present hall?'

'Definitely separate,' said Margaret. 'Tom was very much against sharing. He felt it could only be done as between friends, of similar habits, and even then it could be dangerous to the friendship.'

'Does that mean you will be taking out the present staircase?'

'We shall. It gives us an extra room at the end of the

hall, and a similar one upstairs. We are putting in an outside staircase for the top flat.'

'The back staircase goes with the semi-detached house, I suppose?' said Mrs Drummond.

'Yes. It's rather a steep staircase, but we hope that won't put people off living there.'

There was another awkward pause and then the vicar began again.

'And the main staircase? What do you intend to do with it?'

'How do you mean?'

'Will you sell it or use it for something, or cut it up, or what?'

'I really don't know.' This was going a little too far. Margaret thought, so she added coldly, 'Why?'

Mr Drummond grew very red in the face.

'You must be thinking me very impertinent, Mrs Seeley. My reason for asking is this. Your staircase is of oak, as I expect you know. It was made about a hundred years ago for the Osgood family of that date, by a local carpenter, who also, at that time, or at any rate during the course of his career, carved some new pew ends for the church. Of course they are *old* pew ends now. Since the fire in the west end just before the war, when all that part of the nave was practically destroyed, we have been several pews short on each side. We had to rebuild the fabric, and all the insurance money was needed for that. We have never been in a position to replace the pews. Now I thought, if we could have your staircase we could make new pews out of it. If I remember rightly there are carved posts on either side at the bottom of the hall, and several similar ones on the landing. They would make splendid pew ends.'

'I think there are six altogether,' said Margaret, trying to remember.

'And we need three pews each side,' said the vicar, triumphantly.

Mrs Drummond sat forward.

'My husband has always had his eye on that staircase,' she said. 'He tried to get Mrs Osgood to leave it to the church in her will, but of course he had no success.'

'Of course?'

'She was not an easy person to persuade,' said the vicar, sadly.

'She accused him of criminal intention,' added his wife, indignantly. 'All because of the old legend about the staircase, I expect.'

'Is there a legend?' asked Margaret, with revived interest.

'Hardly that,' said Mr Drummond. 'It only goes back to Mrs Osgood's father-in-law's time. There was an eccentric uncle by marriage of hers, her father-in-law's youngest brother. A little wanting, as often happened to one unfortunate in those huge Victorian families. Anyway, this man, who can't have been very deficient, merely eccentric, because he was allowed to look after his own income, was given to cashing large cheques into sovereigns, and these simply melted into thin air. He never left the neighbourhood, and never spent much money in it. He gave the Osgoods a monthly sum for his keep, and he must have hoarded his sovereigns somewhere in the house. No one ever found out where. After he died this rumour or legend or invention grew up that he had put them in the round top of one of the staircase posts.'

'Do they screw off, then? I thought they were all carved in a piece. How exciting! I must have a look when I go home.'

'They won't all unscrew,' said the vicar. 'But it is believed that two of them do.'

'Mrs Osgood's husband, the nephew of the queer uncle, said the whole thing was nonsense,' put in Mrs Drummond. 'He said he wasn't going to spoil a good oak staircase tampering with the carved knobs. Mrs Osgood agreed with him. But she need not have accused Lionel of wanting to look for gold, when he only asked her to leave the banister posts to the church.'

'It isn't as if I was asking for myself,' added Mr Drummond.

Margaret laughed.

'I'll talk to Tom,' she promised. 'He might like to see if the mad uncle story has anything in it. Anyway, if we haven't already sold the staircase to the builders, I don't see any objection to selling it to the church, if you really want it.'

Mr Drummond did not look very pleased at this, and after exchanging signals with his wife, they both got up, saying it was time they left the party.

Margaret rose too, but before she could move away to find Tom, a voice at her elbow made her turn. She found herself looking down into the flushed face and rather prominent eyes of Miss Laura Osgood.

'Don't go yet,' urged the latter, putting on a pleading expression. 'I've been hovering for ages waiting for the Drummonds to release you. Was the vicar delivering a sermon? He went on and on and on, didn't he?'

'He was talking about our staircase,' said Margaret.

'Do forgive me for interrupting, but shall we sit down,' Miss Osgood suggested.

Margaret saw herself trapped for another long discussion. She flung a hasty glance round the room, but Tom was nowhere in sight. So, as she did not want to be churlish to Fairlawn's former owner, she seated herself with an inward sigh, turning an intelligent face towards her companion.

'The staircase?' asked Miss Osgood.

'Yes. A long story about an eccentric relation of yours, and a bag of sovereigns; real gold ones, not pound notes. Mr Drummond seemed to want to buy the staircase for pew ends for the church. At least, I think he would have liked us to give it to him—to the church, I mean. But I'm sure Tom wouldn't do that. He wants to make something out of it. The conversion is costing the earth, anyhow.'

'Naturally,' said Miss Osgood, a little obscurely. 'Did

he think you would hand it over, complete with hidden coins?’

‘I suppose he did. No, he can’t have. He must realise we’d be bound to look for them. The thought of hidden treasure is irresistible.’

‘Quite. But I assure you the reality is much less exciting and romantic. My mother once had a thorough search made of the staircase, and she did not find any bags of gold. Not even a place to put any in.’

‘Well, if Mr Drummond wants his pew ends he will have to get the church authorities to offer the market price for them. Otherwise our Mr Green will take them away.’

‘Mr Green? Oh, yes, of course, you have Saunders, don’t you?’

Miss Osgood’s tone was enthusiastic.

‘You approve of our conversion, then?’ said Margaret.

‘Yes. You couldn’t have done better. Did I sound pleased? Perhaps I let my feelings show too much in my words. But I can’t help it. You just can’t imagine the wonderful freedom I feel in living in my dear little Bank-side, after that dreadful Fairlawn.’

‘Did you always hate the house so much?’ asked Margaret, for something to say.

Miss Osgood’s face changed suddenly. Her fussy, vapid expression melted away, giving place to a stubborn obstinacy. But the prominent eyes, looking aslant at Margaret Seeley, were dark and sad.

‘I did not begin to hate it until my grandfather died,’ she said slowly. ‘I don’t think I noticed it much till then. It was the place where I grew up. I had my own room, and a workroom where I did my sewing and painting. I was always a great gardener. Mostly because my grandfather was passionately fond of flowers. I painted my flower pictures for him, really. No, I didn’t hate it then. I took it all for granted.’

‘Including several excellent maids, I imagine?’ prompted Margaret.

‘No. Only two. I don’t count our old nanny. She

came back to us when she retired, but she only lived three years. Mother never wanted her back. She reminded her too much of Francis, my brother who was killed in the First War. It was grandfather who sent for her when she had nowhere to go. He made everything easy for people.'

There was a long pause, which Margaret did not like to break. At last, Miss Osgood sighed deeply.

'That was a long time ago,' she said. 'Even the Second War years at Fairlawn seem a long time ago, now, though they were particularly grim at the time. You see, we lost the maids,—called up,—and we had to give their bedrooms to evacuees. It was all the unpleasantness over *them*, and getting furious several times a day, that weakened Mother's heart, I'm sure. She was worn out by it all. She never much cared for having visitors to stay; even our personal friends, or relations. She always rather grudged any entertaining we did, even in India, when my father was alive. Though I hardly remember those days: I was very young, and my brother only a baby. Mother always hated parties.'

'Not like our hostess of to-day,' said Margaret, smiling. She had caught a glimpse, across the room, of Buffy's radiant face as she chatted madly with a group of her more intimate friends.

'Those smart people from London always frighten me,' said Laura Osgood, following Margaret's glance. 'I've always preferred the country myself.'

This did not need any answer, and Margaret attempted none.

'Commander Howard is very patient with her,' Miss Osgood went on, in a confidential voice. 'She runs up bills, you know.'

Margaret did not know, and she felt very strongly that this was no place to learn it. She decided that she had stayed at the party quite long enough and rose to her feet, murmuring, 'Now where in the world has Tom got to?'

'She borrows money to pay them,' continued Miss Osgood, quietly, rising to her feet at the same time, 'and doesn't pay it back.'

Margaret pretended not to hear this, but continued to stare about the room, searching for Tom. When she next looked round she found she was alone, and saw that Miss Osgood was drifting very slowly away in the direction of the Drummonds.

A few seconds later the group around Mrs Howard broke up with loud cries of farewell, and surged towards the door. Margaret caught her hostess's eye, and the latter came across to her.

'I ought to be getting back,' said Margaret. 'Have you seen Tom anywhere?'

'Bill took him away,' said Buffy Howard. 'You can't go yet. I haven't spoken two words to you.'

'One never can speak to anyone at one's own parties,' said Margaret. 'It's been lovely, but I think we must make a move. Oh, there's Tom. And Bill. Near the door. I didn't see them come in.'

'They haven't been there a minute,' said Buffy. 'If you really must . . .'

'I must. Thanks most awfully for a lovely party,' repeated Margaret, but her hostess had already moved away from her. She squeezed herself through the crowd, which still seemed quite settled, to where Tom and the Commander stood talking together.

'Oh, there you are!' said Tom, as his wife reached him. 'Time we made a move, do you think?'

'I've already said good-bye to Buffy,' answered Margaret. 'She's back there by the window. I've been looking for you.'

Tom moved away to find Buffy.

'I was showing Tom my anti-jackdaw gadget,' said Bill Howard. 'Have one for the road?'

'No, thanks. Anyway, it would be on false pretences, as we only have to go out of your gate, and in at ours.'

'Up miles of drive,' said Bill. 'Most exhausting.'

'No, thanks. Really, I mean it. What is an anti-jackdaw gadget, and where do you have it?'

'On the chimney. Special sort of cage to stop them

building their nests in the chimney, which they have a persistent little habit of doing.'

'What happens if they do?'

'You may get young birds falling down into the rooms, and hell it is getting them out. Or you may, if you light the fire during the summer, get the whole nest in flames falling down into the hearth. Besides the noise they make, twittering and squawking.'

'Have you had them often?'

'Two years. This summer we put up the wire contraption. Tom said he'd seen a couple of birds sitting on one of your chimneys. Probably my jackdaws, frustrated.'

'Then I'll certainly mention it to the builders. We don't want any more complications at Fairlawn. There are enough as it is.'

IV

I HEARD noises in the night,' said Margaret Seeley, at breakfast next day.

Being Sunday, this was a leisurely meal, with the Sunday paper divided between them, and third cups of coffee.

'So did I,' replied Tom, looking at her affectionately. 'Your usual little grunts and teeth-grindings.'

'Noises in the *house*,' said Margaret, firmly. 'You were so fast asleep, you didn't even hear me get up and go out to investigate.'

'I suppose as you didn't wake me up when you got back, there was nothing to report?'

'No. I went down to our flat, but its doors were locked, as we left them, and the windows were all shut. I stood in the shadow in the hall for a long time, but I didn't hear anything except a dog barking a long way off.'

'You didn't hear any jackdaws?'

'I don't think they operate at night, do they?'

'I haven't a clue.'

'I must remember what Bill said to-morrow when I see Alf. He'll have to go up and look at the chimneys for nests. It wasn't birds, Tom.'

'What wasn't?'

'What I heard in the night. I wish you'd be interested.'

'Other people's nightmares are never very thrilling. But I'm listening hard. Really, I am.'

'What I thought was, as I didn't find anyone in the house, what I must have heard was them leaving.'

'*Leaving?*'

'People, or a person, who had been in the house.'

Leaving, and pulling down a window behind them. Something snapped shut somewhere.'

'If you'd said at the start you heard someone pulling down a window . . .'

'I didn't. I said that's what it might have been. I want to find out if someone really did come in; and what for. I think, if there was someone, it might have been the vicar.'

Tom laid down both newspaper and pipe to stare across the table at his wife.

'Where do we keep the thermometer?' he asked gently.

'You won't need it. Just listen first.'

Margaret described her conversation with Mr and Mrs Drummond at the party of the evening before.

'I didn't say anything about it last night because I was sure you wouldn't want to think about selling the staircase to Mr Drummond or anyone else.'

'Certainly not.'

'But he *could* have come, don't you think?'

'Highly improbable.'

'Shall we look at the staircase?'

'If you like.'

When Margaret had finished the modified housework of Sunday morning, she and Tom went over the whole of the main staircase from top to bottom. They found no signs of a stranger's recent presence on or near the stairs, and no recent damage to the staircase itself.

'These are all old scratches,' Tom said, firmly. 'The polish has been right inside those cracks for years.'

'Mr Drummond seemed to think the mad uncle hid his gold in the knobs of the posts,' said Margaret. 'But they don't unscrew, do they?'

Very patiently Tom went round all the posts, starting at the top and working down to the hall. Every knob was solid at its base, and though the elaboration of the carving made it very difficult to say if they had been added separately or carved in one piece, it did not seem possible that any of them was made to come off.

As he was trying to turn the last knob, covering it with

his handkerchief to get a grip, as he had done with the others, he heard Margaret calling to him.

'Tom! Tom, come up here a minute.'

He went upstairs quickly to join her.

'Look!'

She was pointing to the foot of one of the slender banisters. Bending closer, Tom saw a small sprinkling of fresh sawdust lying close to its foot.

'That wasn't here yesterday,' said Margaret. 'I can swear to it, because I swept the stairs down after lunch to get rid of the plaster dust, at least for a few hours. I should have noticed it if it had been there then.'

'You could hardly have failed to notice it,' Tom agreed. 'If you were looking at the stairs rather than the banisters. We missed it just now.'

'You did. I was on the lower flight, then. Where has it come from?'

Tom considered this.

'Looks as if someone has been working on these banisters,' he said. 'Perhaps they unscrew.'

'I don't see how,' said Margaret. 'There isn't any way they can come out: they're fixed both ends, by the rail here, and the step there.'

'Half a minute,' said Tom.

Holding the thin central part of the post in one end, he pulled and twisted at the highly ornamental ends. A look of surprise came over his face.

'Something moved,' he said. 'Yes, it's this moulding. It moved, screw-wise.'

The moulding, as he forced it round, gave a complaining squeak, and a small shower of sawdust fell on to the stair beside the little heap Margaret had noticed. A few seconds later the moulding slid up over the thin part above it, and by repeating the process with its fellow at the upper end, Tom soon had the two ends exposed. A little jerk, and the post came away from the rest of the banisters.

'Hollow,' said Tom, turning it about, 'but empty.'

They stared at one another for some time.

'Empty,' echoed Margaret, at last. 'We can't prove a thing.'

Tom was not listening to her. He was more interested in the other banisters. Before long he had the whole flight dismantled, the posts and mouldings laid side by side, all hollow, all empty.

'I don't see any point in going on,' he said. 'Even if the rest of it is the same.'

'Why not?'

'Because whoever unscrewed one of them last night knew which one to go for. Otherwise we'd have found sawdust on every stair. They all fit very tightly, and have not been moved often, I should think.'

'The third from the top,' said Margaret. 'They must have found what they wanted straight off.'

'That's what I said. Or else found it empty and gave up.'

'I don't think Mr Drummond would. Give up, I mean.'

'It may not have been Mr Drummond.'

'Who else?'

'Almost anybody. If there is a legend about the staircase and hidden gold, it's a safe bet every living soul in the village knows the story. And as for interested persons, why not Miss Osgood herself? You say you told her about your conversation with the Drummonds.'

'But why Miss Osgood? She said there was nothing at all in the mad uncle story, and she ought to know. She lived here all those years. If there had been anything hidden in the staircase she could have taken it out any time. She wouldn't be likely to have sold the staircase as it was, if she knew it had a small fortune tucked away inside it.'

Tom nodded slowly.

'Since whoever came only opened one banister, they would find a very small fortune indeed, even supposing there was any money there.'

'I don't know. Sovereigns were quite thin, weren't they? Not like threepenny bits.'

'Not at all like threepenny bits. Yes, I suppose you could get quite a considerable number into one of these hollow banisters. But I rather agree with you. Miss Osgood would naturally have removed them before, if they were ever put there. I wonder who, beside the Drummonds, knows the legend of the mad uncle.'

'I told you. Every man jack in Shipworth.'

'Including all our building friends, I imagine.'

'I won't suspect Alf. I'd sooner suspect Buffy Howard. Miss Osgood said she runs up bills, and borrows money, and doesn't pay it back.'

'Miss Osgood seems to have been full of information, and not very choice as to where she imparted it.'

'I'm afraid she's rather that sort of woman.'

Work began again at Fairlawn on Monday. Margaret waited until the first tea-break showed its usual signs of coming to an end. First Fred would break into a few bars of a popular song, then Alf would take up the tune in a piercing whistle in a totally different key. Then their heavy feet could be heard trampling slowly up the front stairs. To-day more than one voice and whistle took up the refrain. For the Corporation had at last sent their men to lay the second water main, and they were halfway up the drive, cutting their way towards the house.

Margaret waylaid Alf and Fred at the foot of the stairs.

'You know you said you thought the chimney in our bedroom might be blocked,' she began.

'It smoked bad when I lit a bit of paper in it to see how it draws,' said Fred.

'Yes. Well, Commander Howard thinks it could be jackdaws.'

'He's right there,' said Alf. 'The vermin. Shipworth's full of them.'

'What had we better do?'

'I'd a mind to go up the roof one day when the weather wasn't too bad,' answered Alf. 'I'll get the ladders up for this afternoon, if I can.'

'You'll want to use the 'phone,' said Margaret, who knew all the drill for communicating with the builder's headquarters.

'If you please, mam.'

The ladders came on the builder's van just before the lunch-break. Mr Green brought them in person. Margaret saw the van halfway down the drive, with Mr Green in earnest conversation with the men from the Corporation's water works. She saw him get out of the van and walk back to the road with them, where all three stared down into the hole that had been made that morning.

She arranged to be passing through the hall just as Mr Green came back to the front door.

'I hope there are no snags about the water,' she said, with some inward misgiving.

'Their headache, not mine,' said Mr Green. Seeing his own cheerfulness was not reflected in Margaret's face, he added gravely, 'But it's going to delay them. The Gas Board are not exactly on their toes.'

'What has the water main to do with the Gas Board?' asked Margaret, still more worried. 'I thought this was the Corporation.'

'It is. These blokes' trouble is they don't know t'other from which. The mains in the road run side by side.'

'They don't know which is *theirs*?'

'That's right.'

'Oh, but . . . Oh!' Margaret began to laugh, and Mr Green joined her.

'Bit of a shemozzle if they ran gas into your cistern,' he said, when he could speak.

'Or water through the gas pipes. What do they propose to do?'

'Notify the Gas Board and get their expert out to give the verdict.'

'But the Gas are putting us in a new main, too. I suppose they'll make a double job of it, now they've got the road up.'

'That's very unlikely,' said Mr Green. 'Now, where will I find Alf? I want to have a word with him about the roof.'

'And the chimneys,' suggested Margaret.

'That too. He says you've got jackdaws.'

'We may have. In any case I think we'd better have one of those cages that keep them out.'

'There's only one thing keeps them out,' said Mr Green pessimistically. 'And that's smoke. A good smoky fire. That chokes 'em.'

'I couldn't have a fire in the summer. Besides, it's going to be my bedroom. I couldn't have a coal fire there, anyway.'

'More's the pity. If Mrs Osgood had had a good blazing coal fire in her room she wouldn't have died the way she did.'

He went off to find Alf before Margaret could ask him what exactly he meant by this.

In the afternoon of that day Margaret, who was weeding in the garden, saw Alf and Fred emerge from behind a sloping part of the roof, carrying a short ladder between them. This they took along a flat stretch to the base of the suspected chimney, and leaning it securely against the brickwork, Alf mounted, while Fred stood below with his foot on the bottom rung.

For some time Alf peered down the top of the chimney. Next he called for a rod, and having gone up with it proceeded to poke and prod, stopping only for breath.

'The room'll be covered with soot,' Margaret said to herself, hurrying indoors.

But she found that no soot had fallen, only a few twigs and some crumbled mortar from the sides of the chimney. Presently she was joined by Fred.

'There's a new nest there, up at the top,' he told her. 'But under that there's a rare old mess. A cage to keep 'em out, that's fallen in sideways and wedged on two loose bricks. And it's full of dirt, brickdust and that, and a piece

or two of the coping of the chimney. Alf reckons we'll need a sweep down 'ere while 'e loosens it up top.'

In the end this was found to be necessary, and a whole barrow-load of sticks, bricks and mortar dust was extracted, swept up and taken away. The sweep found the other chimneys clear. Alf fixed a new wire cage to the threatened chimney, a large affair like the top of a bowler hat. It seemed to present a very forbidding convex surface to would-be nesters, and both Margaret and Tom were hopeful.

They walked to and fro on the lawn on the Thursday evening of that week, reviewing the progress made since Monday.

'The water main is in,' said Margaret.

'And the trench is filled up again,' added Tom. 'In spite of the fact that a gas main has to be laid in the same trench, side by side with the water, and that an expert came from the Gas Board to show the water men which was his, and which was their, main pipe.'

'Oh, yes,' said Margaret. 'You'd have thought he would have sent his own men in the next day to follow up.'

'Not in 1951,' said Tom. 'Formerly, perhaps, when the boss of the gasworks knew the boss at the water works as a personal friend, a potential colleague. We could have got in touch with one or other of them, and the job would have been arranged the most sensible and economical way. But not now. Nationalisation is for the *public*, not the *private*, welfare.'

'Who exactly, is the public?' Margaret asked.

'Hush. That is a question that must not be asked.'

'Why not?'

'Because nobody knows the answer.'

They took another turn up and down the lawn, and then came to a stop in answer to a hail from the next garden. Bill Howard, mounted on his garden steps, was beckoning to them.

'Your jackdaws,' he said, as they drew near, 'have been

sitting on a tree in my garden all day, mourning their disaster.'

'They weren't our jackdaws,' Margaret protested. 'They were yours originally.'

'Oh, no. Definitely yours. Alf told me they must have nested at Fairlawn for years, cage or no cage.'

'Then I expect they were discussing how to move back to you, in spite of your barbed wire.'

'Our chimney was completely blocked,' said Tom, trying to make a diversion.

'So I've heard.'

'Which makes it difficult to understand why Mrs Osgood went on occupying that room. Her gas fire must have been very smelly, with the fumes driving back into it.'

'I don't think so. Perhaps a little. More dangerous than smelly. Carbon monoxide has no smell.'

Margaret had listened to this conversation without much interest. But now a thought occurred to her and she said, 'Was that what happened? I mean, was she overcome by fumes, and then fell on the fire?'

Commander Howard did not answer at once. Tom put in briskly, 'Let's have the whole story, Bill. We keep hearing a word here and a word there, and we haven't liked, being newcomers, to seem eager or ghoulish. But what exactly *did* happen that afternoon of the fire?'

Bill Howard looked at him squarely.

'I don't know,' he said. Then seeing their incredulous surprise went on at once, 'I don't think anyone knows how she managed to get herself alight. It was late afternoon or early evening, and we were all in the garden. I mean Buffy and I were in the garden, and Miss Osgood was in hers. It was chilly for the time of year. We suddenly heard a scream from the direction of Fairlawn, and then another, and we heard Miss Osgood cry out, "Mother! What is it? I'm coming!" I jumped up on my barrow, which was under the wall, and saw her at the window of her mother's room. She shouted out, "Help! Fire! Help!" and I

didn't wait to ask questions. I grabbed Buffy and we dashed round and up the drive. The front door of Fairlawn was never locked in the day time, only on the latch, so we rushed in and nearly collided with Miss Osgood, who was clambering to her feet in the hall. She panted out that she'd slipped and fallen in her haste. Buffy flew on into Mrs Osgood's room, while I hoisted up Miss Osgood. We were only a few seconds behind Buffy. I don't remember exactly what happened then, except that I whipped a blanket off the bed and rolled Mrs Osgood in it. Miss Osgood had snatched away the burning rug that was over the old lady. Buffy helped me to put out Mrs Osgood's burning clothes. After that other people came in, and the doctor arrived, and we were ordered off to have our hands and faces seen to. Miss Osgood was burned the worst of us three, because she tackled the blazing rug.'

'Who put the fire out?' asked Tom.

Bill Howard looked puzzled.

'I've just been telling you . . .' he began.

'I mean, who put out the gas fire?' Tom repeated. 'Turned it off, I suppose I ought to have said.'

'I don't know.' Howard thought for a second. 'Not me. I can't remember. Probably Buffy. I seem to remember she joined me rolling Mrs Osgood in the blanket: she wasn't there when I started. And she actually got into the room first. But really, you know, there was nothing in it. We were right on top of one another. I expect Buffy turned off the tap as I reached for the blanket.'

Tom would have asked another question, but Margaret, who had slipped her arm through his, tugged gently at him.

'Time to go in,' she said. 'Now we know the whole thing, it won't be so awkward when people avoid mentioning it. She died from shock, did she?'

'Heart, I believe, more than shock. The burns were not very severe, because she had so many clothes on. Heart gave out, as they'd expected it would for years. Fright,

too. I've never seen such a look of utter terror on a human face as that woman had. Not even in the war.'

'Did she never say how it happened?'

'She never said anything coherent again. She was quite conscious, and occasionally she muttered something that sounded like "judge" and "judgement". Most of the time she just lay there, staring at her terror, until she died. So Miss Osgood told Buffy.'

'How horrible!' exclaimed Margaret. 'It doesn't bear thinking of.'

She and Tom went into the house. When they had switched on the reading lamps and settled down, Margaret said, 'It's funny about that gas fire.'

'What's funny?'

'Well, I didn't want to interrupt you and Bill, but as a matter of fact I got Buffy to tell me her version of the accident the other day. It was exactly the same as his, except that she said *he* must have turned off the gas.'

'He said Buffy must have turned it off.'

'I know.'

'Obviously neither of them did.'

'Then it must have been Miss Osgood.'

'She was pretty occupied with the rug, by all accounts.'

'By two accounts. Buffy's and Bill's.'

'Yes.' Margaret hesitated, and then said slowly, 'If anyone did turn it off. If it was ever lit.'

Tom stared at her.

'Because of the chimney,' he said, nodding his head. 'That's a point. No one says who lit it, or when? Could have been Mrs Osgood herself, I suppose. She wasn't a cripple. Perhaps she could have turned it off, too. Before she was well alight.'

'From Bill's description she was too terrified to do anything but scream. Too terrified to say afterwards what had happened.'

'She *must* have had the fire on,' said Tom patiently. 'How else could she set herself alight? The daily had gone home and she was alone in the house. Her daughter was

in the garden. I think Miss Osgood turned the fire off, unless Buffy is lying out of modesty.'

'Judge,' said Margaret, thoughtfully, not paying attention to this. 'Judge. Judgement. A judgement on her. It's funny to hear she kept saying that. It's what Alf said. "That warn't an accident," he said. "That were a judgement." He meant it, too.'

V

THE next week saw the arrival of the plumbers. Margaret was warned of this by Mrs Holbrook, whose parting words on Saturday morning were, 'My Jack's coming up here, Monday. It was to be expected they'd send 'im along, now you've got the main in.'

'Oh, yes?' said Margaret, expectantly.

'For the plumbing,' Mrs Holbrook went on. 'My Jack's been with Saunders ever since 'is apprenticeship.'

'As a plumber,' said Margaret, enlightened.

'That's right.'

Jack Holbrook had a spare intelligent face, evidently taking after his father, for he bore no resemblance whatever to Mrs Holbrook. He had very controlled hair, and a small dark moustache. He brought with him a large boy, in clothes several sizes too tight for him, who at once showed a tendency to drop whatever it might be he was holding.

Margaret made a point of finding them early on Monday morning. They were standing in the smaller half of the room that had been divided to form a bathroom and kitchen.

'Good morning,' she said, cheerfully. 'This is quite a step forward.'

Jack Holbrook displayed all his mother's cautious approach to life.

'Well, we can make a start, certainly,' he said. 'But we can't get far until the drains are fixed.'

'Isn't that part of the plumbing?'

Mr. Holbrook's expression struggled between affront, contempt, and pity.

'The outside work doesn't concern me,' he said. 'I'm indoors. Pipes, and that.' He evidently decided that full explanation was impossible in face of her total ignorance, and said, in an altered tone, 'Can you tell me where I can contact Mr Green?'

'You mean you want to telephone?'

'If you don't mind, madam.'

Margaret led him away, hearing, before she left the sitting room, a familiar opening.

'They don't seem to have brought up the tank, nor the stove. A Crane, wasn't it? You'll want a decent-sized tank. The bath's a full size one. O.K. . . .'

The morning passed quickly enough. When Fred came for the first kettle Margaret was in the kitchen doing her weekly wash. She remarked upon the full house they had this morning, at which Fred grinned.

'Come week after next there'll be another lot as well. The white-coated gentlemen'll be 'ere.'

'The who?' asked Margaret.

'The painters. We call 'em the white-coated gentlemen. They'll be making a start on the downstairs. The plaster's dried out a treat these last three weeks. Alf says it won't want above another few days.'

'How wonderful!'

This was news indeed for Tom, even if the plumbing situation was uncertain. Margaret looked forward to telling him all about it that evening.

During the next few days there were several welcome excitements. The new bath, basin, and discreetly named low-down suite, all in a delicate shade of pale green, arrived together one morning. The tank and a hot water cistern came the following afternoon. The former were stacked in one of the new bedrooms, and Jack Holbrook drew a large arrow on the fresh plaster of the wall beside them, with a legend above, saying, 'Fragile. Handle with care.' Margaret was sorry to see the plaster defaced, but she admired the care shown, and in any case had become fairly used to seeing things written on the new walls.

In the Retiring Room, where everyone worked at his Pools during the lunch hour, there were large areas covered with the rough calculations from which results were compiled.

So the work went on. Jack and the clumsy boy slowly built up a nest of bent pipes, made to travel between the new stove and the tank, the stove and the hot water cistern, the cistern and the bath, taking in the basin on the way, and the flush of the low-down suite. Off-shoots made their way towards the kitchen window, beneath which would stand the kitchen sink.

Margaret spent a good deal of time that week in the garden, working in the beds near the house. She was fascinated by the shapes into which Jack, with his apparatus set up on the lawn, moulded the different sizes of piping, and by the patience with which he slowly worked them to the exact measurements he needed.

On Friday, as usual, she put out a basket of mixed garden produce for the men to take home. Jack Holbrook sought her out to thank her personally for his share.

'I'd like to say what a difference it's made to my mother you coming here,' he added, as he turned away.

'We certainly couldn't do without her,' said Margaret, warmly. 'It made such a difference having someone who knew the house already.'

'When Mrs Osgood died,' said Jack, moving nearer again, 'Mum swore she'd never set foot across the threshold again. And she didn't, neether, till the place was sold.'

'Oh,' said Margaret. 'I don't think I quite realised that. You mean she didn't work for Miss Osgood after she was alone here?'

'Not likely.'

'But I thought . . .' Margaret hesitated. 'I thought it was old Mrs Osgood who . . . who made things difficult.'

'If you want my opinion,' said Jack, lowering his voice, though there was no one else near, 'there was precious little

to choose between the pair of 'em, for meanness and fault-finding. Oh, I know Miss Osgood had a lot to put up with, and she certainly did her duty by the old lady, more especially when that good-for-nothing cousin of hers came pestering around. But mean! You ask Mum one of these days. She'll tell you.'

His face grew suddenly red, as if he regretted his outburst. With another muttered 'Thanks a lot, madam,' he strode away.

After these confidences, it did not surprise Margaret to hear Mrs Holbrook confirm and develop them. Her main quarrel with Miss Osgood had been over the question of certain old clothes belonging to the latter.

'She brought them into the kitchen one day for me to cut up for floor cloths and that,' said Mrs Holbrook. 'Good clothes they were, too, with years of wear in 'em, only she'd 'ad them long enough, she said, and wanted a change. Not that 'er new things ever looks any different. Same style, same kind of material, same colour scheme, over and over again.'

Margaret could not but agree with this view of Miss Osgood's clothes, but she said nothing.

'Well, there they were,' continued Mrs Holbrook. 'A heap of rags, as you might say. But there was a whole costume besides the blouses and odd skirts, and it did seem a wicked shame to cut that up, and my Lily getting nothing but trash at these cheap stores in Oldford. So I took the costume 'ome and altered it: Lily's ever such a slim build, and she had two winters' solid wear out of it to work. Smart, too, and looked good. You can always tell a good material.'

'Surely Miss Osgood didn't mind you having it, when she'd practically thrown it away?' said Margaret, wishing to hear the end of the story, which seemed in danger of clogging.

'Mind!' exclaimed Mrs Holbrook bitterly. 'She couldn't have created worse if I'd laid my hands on the

silver plate. If it hadn't been for 'er mother's being in such a bad way with her 'cart, I'd 'ave left there and then.'

'Your son told me you didn't stay on after the accident,' said Margaret.

'That's right. Catch me obliging her after such meanness. Practically accused me of stealing. "And who are you to talk, miss?" I said. "There's nobody in my family turns up at all hours of the day and night, without a penny in 'is pocket, and worse." I spoke to her straight, and I'm not sorry I did.'

'I don't quite understand,' said Margaret.

The last part of Mrs Holbrook's outburst was beyond even her unusually good guessing powers.

'That cousin of theirs,' said Mrs Holbrook with slow contempt. 'Mr Christopher Osgood. Cousin of our Miss Osgood's. A bit of no good, if you ask me. 'E led them a dance at one time, I can tell you. Orphan of the first world war, they say. Mrs Osgood paid for 'is schooling, but he never did her much credit. Too lazy. They got him abroad for a while, but he turned up, of course, like the bad penny he was.'

'When was that?' Margaret asked. Already Christopher Osgood was developing a sinister personality in her mind: she was nearly ready to cast him for the part of nocturnal prowler at Fairlawn.

'Not long before the accident,' answered Mrs Holbrook. 'He came to see them once or twice, and he must have 'ad money then, because he brought his own car, and was dressed up to the nines, bow tie, jazz waistcoat, pin-stripe suit, and those corresponding shoes.'

'Corres . . . ? Oh, yes, I know,' said Margaret. 'Quite smart, in fact?'

'Flashy,' said Mrs Holbrook, with blighting emphasis. 'It didn't last. The police caught up with him. Motoring offences, dangerous driving, no licence, no insurance. I don't know what-all. He was back again once to get his auntie to help. He should have known better than to ask

her for 'is lawyer's fees. The upshot of it was they put 'im inside.'

'In prison?' said Margaret. 'I'm surprised Mrs Osgood let that happen. Even if it cost money. I should have thought she would want to avoid such a thing happening to one of her family.'

'She had it on 'er mind,' said Mrs Holbrook, 'at the end.'

Margaret said nothing. She remembered Alf's emphatic talk of a judgement, of Mrs Osgood's consciousness of being judged. She waited to hear Mrs Holbrook's version, and did not have to wait long.

'I was with her a part of the time,' the latter went on. 'When the doctor persuaded Miss Osgood to rest. He was afraid she'd collapse under the strain. I must say she showed up well over the accident. No one could have done more for 'er mother than what she did. The doctor said if it'd been humanly possible she'd 'ave pulled 'er round, but the heart was too far gone, what with the shock and that.'

Again Margaret waited. Mrs Holbrook's thoughts were balanced so delicately at all times that an ill-judged word might throw them quite off the desired track.

'It was only to be expected,' said Mrs Holbrook, solemnly, 'she'd be going over 'er past in those last hours. She knew it was a judgement: she said as much, and on her nephew's account, too. "Gaol," I heard her say, more than once. She was afraid they'd put him inside on account of her not paying the fines for 'im. It was always "gaol" or "judgement". She never spoke no other words that I heard. You couldn't do anything to quiet her mind. We thought the vicar ought to see her. Doctor said he was the only one could give her peace of mind. But she wouldn't have 'im.'

'Wasn't he with her at all towards the end?' asked Margaret. She understood how shocked the village would be at this.

'Never crossed the threshold of her room,' said Mrs

Holbrook, dramatically. 'He came to see Miss Osgood a good few times, but the old lady wouldn't have 'im in at any price. We never rightly understood why.'

Margaret did not enlighten her. The legend of the staircase, though the vicar spoke of it freely and familiarly, did not seem to be current in the village. So much the better. It would be a pity to stimulate curiosity among those village youths who might be infected with present-day lawlessness. Mrs Osgood, in spite of her conviction of sin, evidently had not wanted to make atonement, or not of the kind the vicar might reasonably be supposed to have wished to suggest to her.

Discussing all these matters with Tom that evening it occurred to both of them to wonder where, exactly, the erring Osgood cousin happened to be at that moment.

Hardly had the Seeleys' car had time to flatten the filled-in trench of the new water main in the drive at Fairlawn, than the Gas Board men arrived, with a pneumatic drill, to dig it out again.

There was a morning's delay to begin with. The drill was not really needed for the still soft surface of the trench, but there were not enough picks at hand to make a proper start with these alone. Moreover the man who worked the drill was neither qualified nor willing to use a pick. A great deal of discussion resulted in several telephone calls, after which the Gas Board contingent found themselves a nest in the shrubs at the side of the drive, and got on with their Pools until lunch-time. During the afternoon, picks having arrived, a fairly long stretch of the trench was uncovered, including the site of the junction of the new water main with its parent supply pipe.

The next day the work continued at a good pace, and on the third an inspector of the Board called to see Margaret.

'I understand there are to be two flats here,' he said. 'That'll mean two separate meters, I suppose?'

'Oh, yes, please,' Margaret answered. 'Like the electricity.'

The inspector smiled politely, brushing aside this irrelevancy.

'The old supply goes to the separate establishment, the maisonette,' he stated, consulting his notes.

'The part of the house we are dividing off,' said Margaret. 'It won't be really separate. Only semi-detached.'

The inspector frowned this time. Chatter, he seemed to indicate, was not called for.

'I should like to know what appliances you will be putting into the flats, and where they are to go,' he demanded quietly, shutting up his book, and taking a step forward into the hall.

'Isn't that my builder's concern?' asked Margaret. 'I mean, the Corporation only brought the new water main into the house, and the Electricity Board only brought the new meters. My builders' electricians fixed all the wires, and separated the two flats and the semi-detached part.'

'We do the whole thing,' said the inspector, loftily. 'Outdoor and indoor.'

'I see. Then I'd better show you the kitchen.'

'If you please, madam.'

Jack Holbrook was at work near the sink, which, mounted now on its supports, was having the water pipes led to it. At the other side of the kitchen the parts of the new water-heating stove stood in a group, tied round with protective cardboard.

'I'm only having a gas cooker in here,' said Margaret. 'Actually it's the one I have at present in the old kitchen.'

The inspector looked disdainfully at the new stove.

'No water-heater?' he asked.

'Not a gas one.'

Margaret did not dare to suggest the convenience, economy, and comfort of a coke stove of the modern type. Nor mention her hopes of getting Tom to agree to a limited

scheme of central heating, which would include a warm towel-rail in the bathroom.

The inspector followed her silently to the old kitchen. There he pronounced her cooker to be one of the old-fashioned type, but agreed that it had still several years of wear in it. Returning to the new kitchen he marked its place on the floor and wrote down various measurements.

'Any fires?' he asked, as he straightened himself, this work completed.

'One,' answered Margaret. 'But it's here already. I mean, it had to be moved for the men to do the chimney and for the sweep, and I don't think they've put it back in its place. But it only needs connecting again. The parts are all here. I bought it as part of the fittings of the house.'

'I'd like to see it all the same, if you don't mind, madam,' said the inspector.

They found it in Margaret's new bedroom, standing near the grate, just as it had been left by the sweep after his and Alf's combined assault on the blocked chimney.

'Very old-fashioned type,' said the inspector, again.

Margaret suppressed an inclination to be nettled.

'There isn't anything wrong with it, is there?' she asked stiffly.

It had hitherto not occurred to her or to Tom that this was the identical gas fire responsible for Mrs Osgood's death. She found herself looking at it with a certain distaste. But the inspector did not notice her manner and scarcely glanced at the fire.

'Our men will naturally test it when they fit it up again,' he said. 'And you ought to have a fire-guard.'

'Why?'

The inspector stared.

'For your own protection,' he said. 'We're supposed to fit them.'

'I don't need a guard, thank you.'

'It's in the Regulations,' he said.

He was stooping double as he spoke, trying to look inside the chimney. Finding it impossible to do this, he went on his knees in the new brick hearth and stared upwards. Margaret thought it appropriate to tell him of their difficulties with the chimney. He nodded, showing more interest than at any time since his arrival.

'This was old Mrs Osgood's room, wasn't it?' he asked. 'Part of it, I mean?'

Margaret agreed.

'Lucky they never used this chimney if it was like you say. They'd have had a terrible fire in it. I warned her when the gas was put in here.'

'Warned her? What of? A fire in the chimney? That couldn't happen with a gas fire, could it?'

'Couldn't it, just!'

'But the gas fire is right outside the chimney. The flames can't go behind.'

'No. But the gas can—before it's lit. And does, too. Haven't you ever made an explosion, leaving it too long to put the match to it? If that happens, behind, in the chimney, and there's inflammable material about, it can easily start a fire. With the top nearly blocked up there wouldn't be a proper draught, so it might go out. Or suck back into the room, most likely.'

'Do you think that's what happened? When Mrs Osgood had her accident, I mean?'

The inspector shook his head.

'Not very likely.'

'But she set herself on fire. She only had this gas fire in the room. There wasn't any other way she could have got her rug and her clothes alight.'

'It wasn't from an explosion in the chimney,' said the inspector in a decided voice. 'She didn't use the fire much. Didn't like it from the start, she told me, when I was fixing it. No, there's been no explosion here.'

'Can you be sure of that?'

'I can.'

'How?'

'Because,' he said carefully, looking at the new fireplace, 'I inspected this same chimney when the gas fire was first installed six years ago. That was when Mrs Osgood was moved into this room. I advised having the chimney thoroughly swept, because the draught was poor. I don't know how much they did. Not much, I shouldn't think. The lower part of it is in exactly the same state as it was when I first saw it.'

'But I had the sweep in myself only the other day,' said Margaret, indignantly.

'You had him to clear the obstruction at the top, I understood you to say.'

'I had him to clear the whole chimney. With the help of the builders, who were on the roof.'

'It's clear enough,' said the inspector. 'What I meant was, there's been no ordinary fire in it, neither when I saw it six years ago, nor since then. But if you are having the gas fire back in this grate I don't see that it matters.'

When Tom heard the details of the inspector's visit, he was inclined to cancel the gas fire altogether.

'Why not have an electric?' he said. 'No smell, no matches. No danger.'

'Except when it gets moved out into the room, and left on, with somebody's dressing gown hanging over it.'

'When have you ever . . .'

'I haven't. But you burned a hole in the lovely one Uncle George gave you, after we stayed with him, and you hadn't got one at all, and he didn't approve of you walking about in pyjamas only.'

'When did we last hear from Uncle George?' asked Tom, switching self-consciously.

'I wrote to him yesterday. He wants to come down and see progress. I told him not yet, because we haven't got a spare room. I can't put him in any of the boys' beds.'

'I should think not.'

‘Of course we’ll have him down as soon as we can,’ said Margaret. ‘The decorators will be in the week after next, for certain, Fred says.’

In the excitement of a renewed discussion of the colour schemes for the various rooms, the question of the gas fire was forgotten. Margaret was careful not to remind Tom of his formidable objections.

VI

CAN I speak to you a moment, mam?' asked Alf, putting his head into the kitchen, and then disappearing again.

Margaret hurried out of the room, and followed him along the passage to where he had paused beside the cellar door.

'Oh,' she said. 'Do you want the key? I'll go and fetch it.'

'It wasn't only that,' said Alf. 'Not but what we shall want the key. It's the window.'

'Which window?'

'Window of the cellar. If you wouldn't mind coming round to the outside, first, I'd like to show you. Before they make a start.'

Margaret, considering that it would save time if she remained silent, at least until she could ask a really useful question, walked on towards the garden door in the hall. Alf followed her.

She found two men crouching beside the cellar window. Here were fresh faces again, she thought, noting that both were black-haired and pale-skinned, but that one had a distinctly Irish cast of features, while the other might have been found in any large town in the United Kingdom.

O'Malley, the Irishman, straightened himself when he saw her coming.

'We waited to let yourself have a look at this,' he said, with a deprecatory grin. 'Before we gets to work on it. We wouldn't like to be moving anything without you knowing how it was.'

'What are you trying to do?' asked Margaret.

The two men pushed up their caps and looked foolish. Alf smiled pityingly.

'Drains,' he said. 'They want to cut past the wall, *here*.'

He indicated a spot midway below the window of the new kitchen and the new bathroom.

'We're connecting you up with the main over by the end of the house,' said the smaller dark man, who had not spoken hitherto.

'I see.'

'They'll cut their trench back through here,' explained Alf.

'Through the flower bed?'

'If there's anything you'll be after moving,' said O'Malley quickly, 'one of us'll give you a hand with pleasure.'

'Thank you. But I can easily take up the plants before you start, if you'll mark the place where the trench will come.'

'That's easy.'

Margaret looked round at Alf.

'What was it about the cellar window?'

'If you'll take a look at it, mam, you'll be able to see for yourself.'

The window was standing slightly open. It was raised only about four inches above the garden bed that lay in front of it. There was a very narrow sill; the window itself was of the casement type, with a latch that fastened on the inside at about the middle of the panes, while at the top and bottom it was secured by bolts. Margaret saw that whereas the latch and the top bolt were intact, the bottom bolt had been sawn neatly through, and this quite recently, to judge from its still shining cut surface.

'It wasn't like this when I locked it up in the holidays,' Margaret said.

'When would it be that you locked it up?'

inquired Alf.

'Ages ago. In the summer holidays. To stop my boys climbing in and out. They'd forgotten about this route by

Christmas, but I didn't open the window again. Only when Mr Green was measuring up.'

'Would that be after the young gentlemen went back to school?' asked Alf.

The makers of drains frowned at this undemocratic politeness. O'Malley said, 'It wouldn't be one of the boys destroyed that bolt, wanting to get in the way he'd been forbidden?'

'No,' said Margaret, coldly. 'Certainly not. I showed Mr Green over, for measuring up, some time after the snow melted. The boys were all back at school then. I would have noticed any damage.'

'But wasn't they home Easter?'

'Yes, of course. But the rule still held. Later on, I was down here every now and then with Mr Stokes, when he was putting in the new electricity wiring.'

'Nothing wrong with the window?'

'There couldn't have been. I remember opening it occasionally to let some fresh air into the cellar. There hasn't been anybody down there since then, to my knowledge. And the window was left fastened up.'

Alf exchanged glances with O'Malley and his mate.

'Someone's been through 'ere,' he said. 'With that bolt cut through you could pull the panes apart enough to get the catch up and after that ease the top bolt out.'

'It does look like it,' said Margaret. 'And it must have been since the second week in June, because that's when Mr Stokes finished the wiring.'

'All the same,' said Alf, 'you always keep the house door to the cellar locked, don't you?'

'Yes, we do. So if anyone did get in through here, they wouldn't be able to get right into the house, would they?'

'Doesn't look like it.'

There was an embarrassed silence. They all looked at the damaged window and not at one another. Margaret felt that she was expected to say something tactful.

'Oh, well,' she got out, on a rather falsely jaunty note,

'whoever thought they might break in must have been disappointed. There is absolutely nothing in the cellar, except the new electricity meter for our flat, and the end of our part of the gas main. Thank you for pointing it out to me. I think I'll get a new bolt put on, all the same. Or shall I wait until you've fixed your drain?'

'We shan't be touching the cellar,' said O'Malley. 'We go right past it. It was when I was stooping down to get my rule on the wall this side of the door, I noticed the gleam of that cut end of the bolt. Then I said to myself, I said . . .'

Alf cut short the development of this one-man drama by asking Margaret if she could move her plants in the men's dinner hour.

'We want the drain fixed as soon as possible,' he said, 'because Jack's held up in the bathroom until he can connect.'

'Do I get my bathroom and kitchen, then?' asked Margaret, quite excited at the prospect.

'That's right.'

'And the bedrooms will be decorated next week?'

'They're making a start on Monday.'

'We shall be moving into the new flat by the end of the boys' term, after all?'

'That's what Mr Green aimed to do for you,' said Alf.

'I think it's simply marvellous,' she answered.

Margaret called down the cellar stairs.

'Dinner on the table, darling. Have you discovered anything?'

'Just coming. I'll tell you then.'

When they were settled at their meal Tom said, 'Your drain men were pretty convinced someone was making a determined effort to break into the house by way of the cellar, weren't they?'

'Yes.'

'It never occurred to any of you that someone may have tried to break out?'

'*Break* out? Would they have to? I mean they only had to unshoot the bolts and unlatch the catch, and there they were.'

'Not if they wanted to shut it up again, so that no one would notice unless they were right on top of the window.'

'Wait a minute, Tom. I'm all bewildered. You're thinking of our midnight visitor and the sawdust on the stair, aren't you?'

'Yes. And I'm thinking perhaps the visitor heard you and made off via the cellar.'

'And stayed there for hours filing through a bolt, so as to shut the window up from outside, etc. Oh, come!'

'Not exactly like that. Suppose someone did a bunk via the cellar after hearing you moving about. And hadn't quite finished the job in hand.'

'I thought we decided he had finished, because only one stair post had been taken out.'

'We may have been wrong. It may have been your arrival that stopped the work. In which case he would want to come back to finish it. And having got out quite easily by the cellar window, would decide to get in again that way. As being easier and safer.'

'As being easier than what? Did we ever decide how the intruder got into the house at all?'

Tom frowned.

'No. We didn't. Why didn't we?'

'We aren't trained detectives.'

'That's no excuse for lack of concentration. Besides, I have my cross-word training.'

'We've had other things to think of. And we didn't really mind about the old staircase, because we aren't going to keep it, anyway.'

'That's the point. We didn't really care. We were only mildly interested. Otherwise we'd have made much more fuss.'

'But I think we ought to care more now. Whoever came in before, means to come in again. And he'll know we've discovered his proposed route.'

'Why proposed? He may have been in and out any number of times already.'

'No. That's wrong.'

'What d'you mean?'

'As I said to Alf, I keep the cellar door in the hall locked. Don't you remember we locked it to keep the boys out of the cellar, and then it was undone for Mr Green to do his measuring up, and then Mr Stokes asked me to keep it locked because he was storing his electrical stuff down there? I didn't mention that to Alf this morning. I was afraid he might be offended.'

'Yes, of course.'

They stared at each other.

'Then how . . .' they both began.

'You go on,' said Margaret.

'How did the intruder get down the cellar to make an exit, if the hall door to it was locked?'

'Hell,' said Margaret, 'he couldn't, could he? That puts paid to our beautiful theory.'

'My beautiful theory.'

'Was it? Bad luck, darling. The drain men must have been right after all. I expect it was a village lad practising to be a burglar.'

'He won't have much success with the new bolt Alf's got for the window. Not without heavy blasting apparatus.'

As Alf had foretold, the plumbing was much accelerated by the installation of the main drainage connections. Very soon the new bathroom and kitchen gave out the sound of running water at frequent intervals during the day. Every evening Tom went round, turning the taps on and off, and pulling the handle of the low-down suite. It all worked to perfection. Margaret went about the village telling the good news to all her new friends and acquaintances.

The Howards were the most enthusiastic of these. Buffy insisted upon visiting Fairlawn one morning for the sole purpose, she said on arrival, of looking at the work accomplished.

Margaret was very pleased to take her round. The Howards were pleasant, friendly people, and though they shared few intellectual interests with the Seeleys, they provided very good company for a chatty evening, and Margaret was always amused by Buffy's alternating states of lavish extravagance and dire poverty. She emerged from both without a trace of strain, not a shining hair out of place, and usually with a new frock of the latest fashion.

'It couldn't be nicer,' said Buffy, following Margaret into a corner of the lawn, where the latter had two deck-chairs and a coffee tray in readiness. 'Elevenses! How heavenly! I never have time at home.'

Remembering how seldom Buffy *was* at home at the appropriate time, and how constant was her mid-morning appearance at the window table of the one village tea-shop, Margaret smiled, but said nothing.

'You really have made a transformation of the place,' Buffy went on. 'I do congratulate you. It's rather a hideous house, really, isn't it?'

'Not exactly handsome. No.'

'I mean, it isn't period or anything, is it?'

'It's a typical nineteenth-century middle-class country house.'

'That's what I mean.'

'Of the mid-Victorian period.'

'Oh, well, you know what I mean.'

'Of course I do. You're quite right.'

'I think the bathroom is heaven. I've always wanted a green bath, to look like a mermaid when I'm in it, but Bill won't hear of putting in a new one.' She paused, and said wistfully, 'I suppose they cost the earth?'

'Pretty nearly,' answered Margaret.

'I envy you, being able to do all this. You'll have a completely new place when it's done. You won't have to decorate anything for years and years.'

'We shan't be able to afford to, after all this.'

'It must be lovely having a wealthy city man for a

husband,' said Buffy, gazing into Margaret's eyes with innocent admiration.

The latter laughed, and turned the conversation to the school holidays, now approaching at their usual inexorable gallop as July moved into its first week.

Buffy listened patiently. Margaret gave her a second cup of coffee. After that there was silence.

'Margaret,' said Buffy solemnly, and stopped.

Oh God, thought Margaret, now she's going to borrow another fiver. She regretted bitterly falling for the first pathetic request. She had not dared to tell Tom. This was going to be worse, because now she would have to explain, instead of shame-facedly emptying her bag, as on the first occasion.

'I'm in a spot, Margaret,' said Buffy, in tragic tones. 'I had to have a dress for a rather important dinner Bill insisted on going to in town last week, and the shop—it was that new one in Oldford, at the top of the town—you know, heavenly models in the window—they let me have it on appro, and some clot spilled a whole gin on to the front of the skirt, so I couldn't send it back, and it cost the earth, and Bill won't pay, he says.'

Margaret kept silent. The hard luck story was inevitable, but she wished Buffy had a livelier imagination.

'So could you possibly—I know I still owe you five—but could you, possibly?'

'How much is it?' asked Margaret weakly, and regretted it at once when she saw Buffy's eyes light up.

'Thirty-four. Guineas.'

Margaret sighed with relief. Such a sum was out of the question. She had not got it, for her reserves were earmarked for the boys' autumn clothes. Tom had not got it, for he had just paid his income tax. She explained gently.

There was an awkward pause, then Buffy got to her feet.

'I'm terribly sorry,' said Margaret, feeling more and more guilty. 'I wish I could. But you see, the conversion . . .'

'I had no right to suggest it,' said Buffy warmly, though her eyes held any but a forgiving light. 'Too bad of me. I'm afraid I was carried away by the general opulence . . .'

She waved her hand towards the house.

'We're doing the conversion out of capital,' said Margaret, stiffly.

'Lucky, lucky people,' answered Buffy, with a gay gesture. 'How I wish Bill had any capital. Instead of that dreary pension.'

She thanked her hostess profusely for 'everything', thus heaping a few more hot coals on Margaret's unwilling head. Then she tripped off down the drive on her high heels, turning at the gate to wave affectionately before she passed out of sight.

O'Malley and his mate put the last inspection cover on their new drain at the end of that week. Their job was finished, they said, and Fairlawn had seen the last of them.

'And I'd just like to call your attention to one thing before I go,' said O'Malley to Margaret. 'Mind you, I've not let a word pass me lips to the others.'

He led the way to the cellar window.

'There was a lot of the boys here when I showed you the fastenings that other time,' he said. 'And maybe I'd have been wiser to hold me tongue. Will you be looking at the window now, mam?'

Margaret saw, only too clearly, the chips and markings where someone had been trying to lever out a window pane.

'Persistent, aren't they, mam?'

'Very. I'll tell my husband when he comes home. Perhaps we ought to have the police.'

O'Malley shrugged his shoulders.

'I come from Oldford, meself. But I'm thinking the village constable would scarcely take kindly to the idea of watching the window for you. And what else could he do, poor man? It would be all round the village, too.'

'That might not be a bad thing. To warn off the culprit.'

'The folks wouldn't take kindly to being suspected by

strangers like yourselves, I'm thinking. If you'll pardon my plain speaking, mam.'

'Perhaps you're right. I'll tell my husband. He must decide.'

O'Malley seemed to think this was a suitable course to take. At all events he had done his duty, and the foreman had not been there this time to steal his thunder.

Tom Seeley was furious when he heard the news, and had inspected the fresh damage. He began to mutter about man-traps and gins and electrically-charged wires.

'But who can it possibly be?' Margaret repeated, over and over again. 'I don't think it's the village. They must know from Alf and Fred and Jack and the others that we haven't anything worth stealing. I mean, no valuable jewellery, or mink coats. No safe.'

'Personally, I think it's the vicar,' said Tom. 'He gave me a particularly dirty look when I met him at the station yesterday evening.'

'That's because we haven't been to church since Easter Sunday, when we took the boys.'

'It's because he wants the gold in the staircase.'

'There isn't any.'

'He thinks there is. He said so.'

'No. He only wanted the carved wood for pcw ends.'

'Don't you believe it.'

After a pause Margaret said, slowly, 'I suppose it couldn't be Christopher Osgood?'

'Come again.'

'The bad cousin. Christopher. The one Mrs Osgood let go to gaol. He'd be out now: it was only a month or so they gave him.'

'Have we any idea where he is?'

'No. But he must be hard up. And if he knew, or thought he knew, there was money here, he'd be much more likely than the vicar, wouldn't he?'

'Yes. Quite seriously, he would. Suppose you ask old Laura to tea on Saturday, to see how well we are progressing. Then we'll pump her about her relatives.'

‘I’ve asked Uncle George for the day on Sunday. Luncheon, he says. That means a chicken, doesn’t it?’

‘No. We’re too poor. Sink the week’s meat ration and get lamb.’

Margaret was glad it had not occurred to her to tell Tom about Buffy’s trouble.

VII

SATURDAY afternoon arrived, and with it Miss Osgood. She walked up the drive at her usual hurrying pace, though the day was exceptionally warm, with a blazing sun pouring down on the hot gravel.

Tom and Margaret, sitting in the garden, in the deepest bit of shade they could find, which was under the trees at the far end of the lawn, saw the last part of her progress as she approached the house.

'A cardigan in this weather!' exclaimed Tom, preparing slowly to heave himself out of his deck-chair.

'*The* cardigan,' said Margaret, cattily, for the heat had made her intolerant. 'Do hurry, darling. She'll be standing on the doorstep, turning into a grease-spot.'

Miss Osgood was rescued from this fate, and guided to a chair in the garden beside Margaret. She lay back thankfully, fanning herself with a bunch of leaves she had evidently pulled from the hedgerow on her way to Fairlawn.

'Shall we have tea out here?' Margaret asked her. 'Or do you think the flies will be too much of a nuisance?'

'Out here, please,' said Miss Osgood, in a weak voice. 'I simply couldn't move again just yet.'

'Of course not,' said Margaret. 'It must have been terrible, walking in this heat.'

Miss Osgood looked about her.

'You've done wonders with the garden,' she said. 'It gives me so much pleasure to see it looking its old self. It quite broke my heart having to leave it when I did. But of course I couldn't afford to have it kept up by anyone else, after I went.'

Margaret waved her hand at the lawn.

'I hope you don't object to our alterations,' she said.
'We have to plan for when it is split up.'

'Oh, dear,' Miss Osgood said, looking about her again.
'Yes, I suppose that is unavoidable. You couldn't have the garden communal?'

'Definitely not,' said Tom.

At a signal from Margaret he rose.

'I'll fetch the tray,' he said.

'The kettle must be boiling its head off,' Margaret added, as if the idea had only just come to her. Tom nodded, moving towards the garden door of the house.

'It seems a pity,' sighed Miss Osgood.

'I beg your pardon?' said Margaret.

'What your husband said. About not having the garden communal.'

'Oh, but we couldn't possibly. You see, we are going to sell the semi-detached part of the house. So it will have to have a plot of land to go with it. And we shall let the top flat, but I'm sure whoever takes it will want a garden of their own. My three boys are so rampageous at present. They're always breaking things and trampling on flower beds to find balls, and catapulting at magpies, and catching butterflies. I couldn't expect strangers to put up with it in a garden where they felt they had equal rights.'

'No, I suppose not,' Miss Osgood agreed sadly.

'But we are going to keep the main part of it for ourselves,' Margaret went on. 'The semi-detached will have to have a piece straight through to the boundary, fenced off, of course, but we can soon put shrubs and things our side of the fence to hide it. Then I thought the top flat could have the small rose garden off the drive and a bit of the kitchen garden at that end. If I give them a gate, and one of those wire fences on concrete posts, they will see most of the rest of the garden and not feel too shut in, don't you think?'

Miss Osgood did not answer, and as Tom appeared in sight at this moment, carrying the tea-tray, Margaret was

able to let the subject drop while she helped him to arrange the tray and its contents on the grass.

After the tea was over and Miss Osgood looked less hot and uncomfortable, the Seeleys led her into the house and showed her the progress made in the alterations. On the ground floor three of the four large rooms had been divided, while the fourth, the former big drawing room of the house, remained intact to form the new sitting room. The remaining ground-floor room, which had been used in the Osgoods' time as a sewing room, and was next door to the new kitchen on the opposite side to the bathroom, had been turned into the Seeleys' new dining room. A hatch was being made to connect it with the kitchen, Tom explained.

'Well, you have certainly altered it out of all recognition,' said Miss Osgood, returning to the hall, and sitting down on the bottom step of the stairs, where she began to fan herself again with her bunch of leaves.

'It will be nice, don't you think?' said Margaret, timidly.

'Very nice,' said Miss Osgood. She stared round at the unfamiliar doors. 'Let me see. Drawing room, dining room, three, no, *four*, bedrooms, kitchen and bathroom. Quite a luxury flat, isn't it?'

She struggled to her feet, and going to each door in turn, opened it, looked in, and shut it again.

'Where will you keep your household cleaning things?' she asked Margaret. 'We always put the Hoover and that sort of thing in the sewing room.'

'We've got those big cupboards in the kitchen,' said Margaret. 'And when the stairs go there will be a little room in the well of the staircase. I expect that will be turned into a junk room, and work room for the boys.'

'Trunk room?' said Miss Osgood, vaguely. 'Yes. Where do you keep your luggage at present? In the cellar?'

She had wandered along the hall, and now paused by the cellar door.

'Actually, in the attics, at the moment,' Margaret

answered. 'Would you like to go down to the cellar? There isn't anything new there, except some of the builder's belongings.'

'No. Please don't bother to fetch the key,' Miss Osgood said, looking at the empty lock of the door.

Margaret was beginning to say politely, 'It isn't any trouble at all,' when Tom's loud voice drowned her own.

'Do you know your way, or shall I lead, Miss Osgood?'

As he spoke he flung wide the cellar door, which opened inwards. Miss Osgood, with a slight gasp, drew back.

'Oh, no, please don't bother,' she repeated.

Into the rather chill silence that followed, Margaret found herself murmuring, 'There's nothing for her to see in the cellar, Tom.'

And Tom, looking down at Miss Osgood, said, 'Perhaps not. Shall we go back into the garden?'

They did not at once return to their chairs under the trees, but wandered slowly past the flower beds, while Margaret explained what she was planning for the future, and Miss Osgood described what she had done in the past to please her grandfather. When the party arrived in the kitchen garden, towards the end of this tour, Tom excused himself on the grounds of having to tinker with the car, and walked off towards the garage. Miss Osgood praised the vegetables, congratulated Margaret on the state of the asparagus bed, and remarked upon the paths.

'You must have had a terrible time with these paths this year,' she said. 'I feel more than ever guilty for leaving the garden to go to ruin as I did.'

'They were pretty bad,' Margaret answered. 'But they might have been a lot worse. In fact, we were rather surprised they weren't worse. Considering the masses of weeds in the beds.'

'I always kept the paths clear with weed-killer,' said Miss Osgood. 'Chlorate of soda. It isn't poisonous, you know, so it is quite safe where there are pets. I always have to think of my dog.'

'Then it can't be administered to one's relations, like the arsenic compounds?' suggested Margaret, laughing.

Miss Osgood smiled too.

'Just so,' she said. 'And it works wonders on the paths.'

'I've heard of it, but I've never used it. Is it very expensive?'

'No, quite cheap. I used to get—let me see—about five or six tins at three or four shillings each, every year. I need much less at Bankside. And it is worth hours of hoeing.'

They wandered back to the lawn.

'Do sit down again,' said Margaret.

Miss Osgood looked uncertain.

'I ought to go home. There are the hens to feed, you know. And Spot to let out. He hates being shut up when I am away.'

'Yes. But the hens won't mind waiting. The sun won't set for ages.'

Miss Osgood took her former seat. She began to fan herself again.

'It really is a bit too hot,' said Margaret. 'We aren't used to it in this country.'

'It doesn't last long as a rule,' said Miss Osgood.

'If we knew when to expect it, we might be better prepared,' Margaret went on. 'But these few weeks of sunshine come at any time from June to September.'

'Yes,' said Miss Osgood, and added in a low voice, 'It was very different weather this time two years ago.'

'Two years ago?'

'We'd just had the hot spell,' said Miss Osgood. 'And then it turned colder, with grey skies, but no rain.'

'Oh,' said Margaret, enlightened. 'You are thinking of the time of your mother's accident.'

'It was middle July,' said Miss Osgood. 'The eighteenth, a Wednesday. I've always remembered that, because it was early closing day in Shipworth, but Thursday is early closing day in Oldford, so if you want anything specially in the afternoon, you have to go to Oldford for it. I had forgotten to get any cake for afternoon tea, and

Mother liked her tea especially, and as I wanted some wool for a jumper, which I always get at Marshall's in Oldford, I went in on the bus after lunch. I was home again in plenty of time for tea. We had Mrs Holbrook daily at that time. She used to get tea ready for me, and leave at five after washing it up. So I was always able to go out in the early part of the afternoon, leaving her to look after Mother. It wasn't much responsibility for her, because Mother rested on her bed in the afternoon, and I settled her there always before I did anything else. She usually slept, or read a novel. We generally had tea in her room in the summer, because she liked to look out of the window at the garden. I was always back in time to get her up for it.'

'You must have been terribly tied, all the same, looking after an invalid,' said Margaret, sympathetically.

'She was my mother,' said Miss Osgood, with dignity.

There was a short pause. Margaret did not want to appear inquisitive, but this seemed to be a unique opportunity for learning the exact truth about Mrs Osgood's unfortunate accident. She waited, but as Miss Osgood did not seem to be going to continue, but was leaning back in her chair, looking dreamily towards the house, she said gently, 'I didn't realise the weather had turned colder that day. I have always wondered why your mother had her gas fire on. I suppose that was the reason.'

'Yes,' said Miss Osgood.

There was another pause. Margaret tried again.

'The Gas Board tell me I ought to have a fire-guard in front of the fire. Did you have one? I suppose not, or it would be with the fire.'

'No. There wasn't a guard. There never had been one. They weren't so full of regulations as they are now. They let people take responsibility for their own lives.'

Margaret felt inclined to say that this was not always successful, but seeing where it would lead, she kept silent.

'Mother felt the cold acutely,' said Miss Osgood. 'I believe heart cases always do.'

'And yet she didn't much like the gas fire in her room,' said Margaret, remembering what the Gas Board inspector had said.

Miss Osgood looked at her in surprise. Margaret blushed.

'We had an inspector from the Gas Board here the other day, and he said he was the same man who had fixed your mother's fire six years ago. He said she wasn't at all keen on having it.'

'No, she wasn't,' agreed Miss Osgood. 'She preferred old-fashioned fires. But I persuaded her to see how labour-saving the gas one would be. And anyway, the chimney smoked.'

'Yes. We've had trouble with that chimney.'

'Mother preferred her rug, unless it was very cold.'

'A rug over her knees? Yes, of course. Then she didn't like you to light her gas fire?'

'No. She wouldn't ever let me. If she wanted it lit, she did it herself.'

'It does seem a pity you didn't have a fire-guard.'

'Mother would never have allowed one in her room. She . . . It was always difficult to make suggestions to her.'

Margaret made a sound to indicate understanding, but did not like to say anything. Her curiosity was, however, thoroughly aroused, so after a suitable pause she said, as casually as possible, 'It was your mother, then, who lit the gas fire in her room on the day of the accident?'

'Yes,' said Miss Osgood, sadly. 'It must have been.'

'And you turned it off?'

'I beg your pardon?'

Miss Osgood looked quite startled.

'When you and the Howards ran in to help. I'm sorry. I expect you'd rather not talk about it.'

'I have talked about it so often,' said Miss Osgood, who had regained control of her features. 'I don't mind now.'

'It was only that the Howards told me how it happened, and they said you were so splendid over it all. So naturally

I thought, as you were first on the scene, you must have turned the fire off, which was the right thing to do, only everyone wouldn't have thought of it.'

'But I didn't,' said Miss Osgood, 'and you are the first person who has suggested it. I wasn't first in the room, either. I tripped in the hall in my haste. Mrs Howard was first. I only saw the rug burning, and poor Mother in the middle of it, and I pulled it away. One of the Howards must have dealt with the fire. In fact, I think that came out at the inquest, if I remember rightly. No, I only saw the rug.' She paused and said in a low voice, full of feeling, 'I shall never forget it.'

There was another long pause. Margaret's bewilderment grew. Here was Miss Osgood denying any interference with the gas fire, the cause of the accident, just as Bill and Buffy had severally made the same denial. It was impossible to imagine that none of them had turned it off. It would be such an entirely obvious thing to do in the circumstances. An old and infirm woman lying up against a gas fire, with her rug and her clothes alight. Pull her away. Yes. Snatch off the rug—certainly. Turn off the fire? Almost certainly. Of course *one* of them would turn off the fire. So why did they all deny it? What possible significance could that have? You would think they would all claim to have exercised this simple piece of common-sense, rather than repudiate it. And one of them must be lying. What a pointless thing to tell a lie about!

In the middle of her groping Margaret heard Miss Osgood speaking again

'The whole of that evening—after the fire was put out, and the doctor came—is a kind of blur to me. My hands were rather badly burned, and were in bandages, and I couldn't use them at all. The doctor wanted me to go to bed; he said hospital, at first, where they sent the Howards, but I wouldn't hear of it. I had shock, I expect, because I kept feeling faint. But I could not leave poor Mother. She was so terribly distressed. We tried to get her to tell us what had happened; we thought it might relieve her

mind, and allow her to rest, but all she could say were one or two words, blaming herself, and worrying about my cousin Christopher.'

'I think I heard something about it,' said Margaret 'He had foolishly got into trouble over a car licence, I believe'

'No It was much worse than that,' said Miss Osgood 'Chris had never been any good, and I'm sure he never will be He stole a car It wasn't licensed, and he had his driving licence taken away for ten years for dangerous driving three years ago He was in an accident with this stolen car, and a man was killed He was lucky they did not find manslaughter Fortunately he wasn't drunk that time, or they would have, I expect Naturally he said he'd hired the car, but that was denied At the time of Mother's accident the case was just about to come up before the magistrates the second time Chris had been remanded the week before, in custody, because he had no money for bail'

'Mrs Holbrook said something about that,' Margaret said 'And how upset your mother was over it, talking about the judge and gaol'

Miss Osgood shook her head

'No,' she explained Not gaol Bail Mother was prostrated with remorse, because she had not tried to stand bail for him Chris had appealed to her more than once, but she refused him Of course they might not have allowed bail, but he could not put up any Mother seemed to think her accident was a punishment for her hardness towards him She was a very religious woman The Bible was her chief comfort Nothing that I could say would alter her conviction It was horrible to see her suffer so much in her mind, as well as her body And so unjustly Chris is a hopeless case he has been like it for years'

'Was he did they ?'

'Oh, yes,' said Miss Osgood, composedly 'He had another prison sentence in the end His third Two years He came out about a month ago'

'How do you know?' asked Margaret, quickly. Then seeing Miss Osgood's astonished face, she added, 'I beg your pardon. That was inquisitive and impertinent of me.'

Miss Osgood smiled.

'Please don't apologise. I'm quite used to the queer situations that develop over Christopher. One just has to put convention on one side where he is concerned. I know when he came out of prison because, as usual, he turned up at my house immediately after his discharge, asking, as usual, for money.'

'So he was in Shipworth a month ago?' said Margaret, thoughtfully.

'Just under, I think. He only stayed a few hours.'

Tom lit a pipe, and drew on it, considering.

'Christopher Osgood is a possibility,' he said. 'Trying to get money out of the staircase.'

'And anything else he could pick up.'

'What about the later manifestations?'

'Miss Osgood only said he had visited her: for a few hours. He could perfectly well come and go in Shipworth without calling at Bankside.'

'It would have to be at night, or the village would know all about it.'

'It would have to be at night, or *we* should know of it.'

'Yes. I don't think we need worry, really. As we know, there isn't anything in the staircase now.'

Margaret sighed.

'I've rather lost interest in the staircase,' she said.

'What really intrigues me is why no one acknowledges turning off the gas fire.'

She described her conversation with Miss Osgood on this subject.

'It's distinctly odd,' Tom agreed. 'But in a way I can understand it. Putting the old woman out was more important than turning the fire off, and they each want to be thought to have done the more heroic thing.'

'Well, I suppose so,' agreed Margaret, a trifle reluctantly.

'What interests me more,' said Tom, 'is what happened to-day.'

'When?'

'When we showed Miss Osgood round. How did she know we kept the cellar door locked?'

'But it wasn't locked.'

'No. I opened it when I went in for the tea. It was locked before that, though. You know we always keep it locked.'

Margaret nodded, and thought swiftly.

'We saw her arriving up the drive,' she said. 'But she was well out of sight again before I could get you to move. So there would have been time. . . . Where was she when you did go in?'

'Outside the front door, ringing the bell. But, as you say, there would have been time to nip into the hall and find the cellar door was locked. And as *we* saw her in the drive, *she* could have seen us in the garden.'

'So she could,' said Margaret.

'Which gave her an idea of how much time she had in hand,' said Tom.

'No wonder she was out of breath and absolutely sweltering,' said Margaret.

'Now you are overdoing it,' said her husband, unkindly.

VIII

UNCLE GEORGE had announced his intention of coming down by train, so Tom met him at the station with the car. The train was seven minutes late, and as Tom had arrived five minutes early, to avoid any chance of keeping Uncle George waiting, his temper was as far from cool as the rest of him. For the bright summer sun continued to beat down on the unaccustomed countryside, and on the unprotected, reddened faces and arms and legs of a people trying to achieve a healthy tan too fast, and against the rules of nature.

In contrast with Tom's shiny discomfort, which was acute, in spite of wearing only a shirt and shorts, Margaret's Uncle George could not have looked cooler. His light grey alpaca suit was neatly buttoned over an ice-blue silk shirt: he wore a white carnation in his button-hole, pearl-grey gloves, and a panama hat, which he put on his head as they left the station, and took off again when he was settled beside Tom in the car.

On arriving at Fairlawn he asked at once to be shown the alterations.

'Won't you sit in the garden first, to cool off?' suggested Margaret. She was busy with the luncheon, and not at all anxious to have the tour take place so soon.

'I am not hot,' said Uncle George, truthfully. 'I have been sitting idle in the train for the best part of an hour, and I need exercise.'

'Oh, please,' said Margaret, abandoning the pretence of considering her guest's welfare. 'I'm cooking, and I can't do anything else at present. And I did so want to show you round the house, myself.'

'Very well,' said Uncle George. 'But I warn you; if you

feed me too well, as you generally do. I shall probably go straight off to sleep afterwards, and be quite incapable of being shown round at all'

'I'll risk it,' said Margaret 'Tom can take you round the garden, if you really can't bear to sit.'

Tom made a face that betrayed an inward groan, but he followed Uncle George's trim figure through the garden door meekly enough. Margaret went back to her kitchen and did not see the two men again until the three of them were gathered round the dining room table.

'You ought to get your man to layer those strawberries of yours,' said Uncle George 'You ought to get some good plants off them if he doesn't let the runners get out of hand'

'We don't have a man,' said Margaret

'What? No gardener?'

'Only a very old gentleman for a half day a week. Mrs Holbrook thinks a relation of hers may have a free day in the autumn, because Mr Drummond, the vicar, is cutting down to one day. But it isn't certain'

'That sounds very difficult,' said Uncle George 'But the garden certainly does you credit if it's all your own work'

'Not quite all. And I told you I was going to garden seriously'

'That was before you actually bought the house,' said Uncle George 'I did not expect the resolution to survive. I congratulate you'

He congratulated her again later on the excellent meal she had produced, and Margaret now looked forward without misgiving to showing her uncle the results of their plans.

'Do you want to go round straight away?' she asked gaily, as she rose from the table 'Or shall we have coffee first?'

'Coffee, I think,' said Uncle George

'Indoors or out?'

'Perhaps indoors'

'I'm afraid our sitting room is upstairs at the moment,' said Margaret. 'In the old part of the house. We keep being chased from one room to another.'

'We ate in the old part, as you call it, didn't we?' said Uncle George, following her into the bare hall.

'Yes. Now here we are in our new flat, which only has to be decorated and have the stairs out, and a little room built in the well of them. But you'll see—later.'

She led the way upstairs to the temporary sitting room. On the landing Uncle George paused, with his hand on one of the carved posts of the banisters.

'So this is the famous staircase,' he said, looking back down the stairs.

'Yes,' said Margaret, and then remembering, added, 'I told you about it in a letter, didn't I?'

'You did,' said Uncle George. 'And I was most interested, and did a little piece of research. And now I can give you its history.'

He kept them waiting, however, until he had drunk his coffee. and then, leaning back in his chair, told them what he had discovered.

'When you first bought Fairlawn,' he said, 'I used to ask people at the Club if they knew anything of this part of the world, but precious few of them did. But there's one old boy;—I hardly ever speak to him in the ordinary way, —but he knows Shipworth, and was most anxious to tell me all about the place. It seems he lived here with his parents when he was a boy, and they knew the Osgoods of that time.'

'Miss Osgood's grandfather's time, would that be?' asked Tom.

'Probably. In any case, when I read him the part of your letter describing the legend of the staircase as you had it from the vicar, he simply roared with laughter.'

'Oh, dear,' said Margaret. 'Isn't it true, then? Wasn't there a mad younger brother after all?'

'There was a queer brother all right,' went on Uncle George. 'But not a wealthy one. I gather he had some

form of mental deficiency, not very obvious, but bad enough to keep him at home, idle, and incapable of following any profession. But he never had any money of his own, so there was never any question of his hoarding it.'

'I wonder how the staircase legend grew up, then?' said Tom.

'I can tell you. Before the new staircase was made there was an older one, naturally. Now the mentally afflicted Osgood had always had a habit of hiding things, preferably in holes he made in the walls and furniture. A dreadful habit; must have been most trying for his relations. One of his pet places was inside the knobs of the old staircase. I don't know how he managed to be so destructive in a well-ordered Victorian household, but I expect peculiarities were tolerated more easily in those days than they would be now. Eccentricity was almost a virtue, not something to be bundled off surreptitiously to the psychiatrist. But, all the same, the Osgoods were worried over their new staircase. It was something out of the ordinary. They had recognised that their local carpenter was a bit of a genius, and they did not want to see his work ruined, quite apart from having their house made unsightly. So they had a very ingenious idea. They made him construct the banisters of hollow posts, fixed in such a way that the idiot brother could unscrew them and take them out if he wanted a secret hiding place for his pathetic scraps of paper and little shells and stones. He took to the idea, apparently, and was made perfectly happy by it. But he did not live to enjoy it very long, poor chap. He was carried off in an epidemic of scarlet fever, which nearly destroyed my informant as well. He tells me all his family went down with it, and he still remembers his brothers and sisters, as bald as coots, because in those days they always shaved the head for a fever. He must be well over seventy, but he told me the whole story as vividly as if it had happened last week.'

'Is his version reliable?' asked Margaret.

'I think so. I was sufficiently impressed to decide to see your staircase to-day, before you disposed of it for nothing.'

Margaret and Tom looked at one another.

'Do you mean it might be *valuable*?' Margaret said at last. 'Really valuable?'

'If you go to the right person interested in it,' said Uncle George calmly. 'There are not many examples of the man's work. Chiefly church pews and part of a screen, and one cover for a font, I believe. The name is known, though. I made a point of finding out. But I shouldn't go to any old dealer, if I were you.'

'We wouldn't,' said Margaret, her voice rising hysterically. 'We wouldn't know any. We've never even thought of it.' She restrained herself, and continued soberly. 'We were going to let our builder have it. Or the vicar.'

Uncle George shuddered.

'Dear me!' he said. 'What a good thing I came down to-day.'

He searched in his breast pocket and brought out a folded paper.

'Try either of the names I've written down,' he said. 'You'd better write to-day and get them to send their own men down to see it. And don't let your builder touch it until they've been. They'd probably arrange for their own people to take it out.'

Uncle George offered his coffee cup to Margaret for replenishment, and then leaned back comfortably in his chair. Tom and his wife looked at one another.

'If there wasn't ever any money in the staircase, and no one expected to find any . . .' began Tom.

'I didn't say that,' interrupted Uncle George.

'Other people besides Mr Drummond may believe in the legend,' said Margaret. 'I'm certain a lot of people do, though they haven't talked to us about it.'

'It seems likely.'

'I don't think it was money they were after,' said Tom. 'Or not the lunatic's hoard. One banister had been tampered with. That suggests there was something known

to be hidden in that particular banister. The question is, what? And who put it there? And who wanted to find it and came at night to do so? And then there's the cellar.'

'Ah,' said Uncle George. 'Margaret wrote about the evidence of attempts to get in that way. I'd like to see the cellar.'

Presently they all went down to the hall, and while Tom fetched the cellar key from the kitchen, Margaret told her uncle of Miss Osgood's unexplained assumption.

'We think she slipped into the hall and tried the door,' she said. 'But we can't imagine why.'

'Nor can I,' said Uncle George. 'I can seldom imagine why women do the things they do. Have either of you met this good-for-nothing cousin of hers, Christopher?'

'No. We wouldn't know him from Adam. But Miss Osgood says he has been in Shipworth since his release. I forget exactly what she said, but I gathered it was money again.'

'It always would be money,' answered Uncle George. 'Perhaps he is entitled to some, or thinks he is so entitled.'

'He won't get it, then. She is just as unwilling to part with any as her mother was, so I've been told.'

The cellar did not occupy the whole area of the foundations of the house, but only a part of it corresponding to the kitchen and scullery. In here, at the beginning of the conversion, Mr Stokes, the electrician, had kept his spare coils of flex and other fittings. After his work was done his assistant had swept the floor clean in the part he had used, pushing the rubbish into a neat pile in one corner. By contrast, the other side of the cellar floor was covered with gritty dust. Cobwebs were thick on the walls.

'If you've got a broom of some sort,' Uncle George said to Tom, 'you might pull out that heap your electrician's boy has made. How lucky we are that the great English public hates actually disposing of rubbish.'

From the pile of cut bits of flex, brown paper wrappings, the cardboard containers of bulbs, and some broken china and bakelite from old switches, three objects were set aside

and handed to Uncle George. These were an old file, broken at one end; the blade of a penknife, and a roll of dirty paper. These three things were found at the bottom of the pile, and not disclosed until Tom had drawn the lighter rubbish away from them.

'This,' said Uncle George, picking up the roll, 'may be of interest to us, I think.'

He led the way upstairs again, paying no attention to Margaret's repeated complaints that he had not even glanced at the cellar window.

In the sitting room Uncle George demanded a duster, with which he cleaned off a few cobwebs and traces of the cellar floor and walls from his find. These included a piece of moss, which Margaret retrieved from the duster and spread out on the table.

'It's rather pretty,' she said. 'I used to love mosses. Look at the little feathery spikes it has.'

Tom looked; Uncle George was busy with the roll of paper. He had opened it out, and pinned its corners down with a couple of ashtrays, his fountain pen, and a small vase of flowers that stood on the table. He then went away to the bathroom to clean the grime from his fingers. In his absence Tom and Margaret inspected the open roll but did not touch it.

'It would be about the right thickness rolled up,' said Margaret.

'I'll unscrew the banister,' said Tom. 'We can try it later.'

He too went away, and Uncle George, on his own return, found the banister lying beside the roll on the table. His eyes gleamed with approval.

'It fits, I suppose?' he asked.

'We didn't try it, as you'd fixed it, open. We thought you'd like to do so yourself.'

'Most considerate.'

Uncle George released the paper, rolled it up again more tightly than before, and pushed it into the hollow banister. It fitted very nicely.

'Now let us see what we've got,' he said.

He spread out the paper while Tom and Margaret moved to positions behind his chair, from which they could read over his shoulder. When they had come to the end of it, Uncle George rolled it up again, and the others went back to their former seats. No one spoke for a time.

'What was the exact date of Mrs Osgood's accident?' asked Uncle George at length.

'I don't know,' said Tom. 'We could ask the Howards.'

'Presently. It was about this time of year, I think you told me at one stage.'

'It was the eighteenth of July,' said Margaret. 'Miss Osgood said that yesterday. A Wednesday, early closing day in Shipworth.'

'The eighteenth,' repeated Uncle George. 'This will was written out on the thirtieth of June, or at least dated then. It appears to be witnessed by your vicar, Drummond, and by a Mrs Holbrook, who describes herself as a housewife.'

'She was the daily here. She works for me, now.'

'It looks to me as if the will had not been prepared by a solicitor. It is typed, but not engrossed, and it is dated, whereas solicitors usually like to add the date themselves to their clients' deeds when they have been signed. It looks to me very much as if Mrs Osgood had had second thoughts, but they were intercepted before they reached her lawyer.'

'It does,' Margaret agreed. 'By this will Miss Osgood is left the house, *provided* she continues to live in it, at least until probate has been obtained, and the death duties paid. If the income from the estate, which also goes to her entire, is then not sufficient to keep it up, she may sell it. But if she does not wait, the property goes to the next of kin.'

'I can see why Miss Osgood suppressed it, then,' said Margaret. 'She had the chance of getting Bankside, her present home. The Howards say houses in Shipworth are always very scarce.'

'I can understand her suppressing it *after* Mrs Osgood's death,' said Uncle George. 'But she appears to have kept it back sometime *before* that event. She appears to have

prevented its reaching the lawyer. A risky thing to do, as her mother was so likely to find her out. I wonder why she did it?'

'Had to take the lesser risk,' said Tom. 'She could explain her action away to her mother, on the grounds of carelessness, or forgetfulness. The old woman was liable to die at any moment.'

'You may be right,' said Uncle George. 'It certainly looks as if she *expected* her mother to die at any time.'

'Isn't that the same thing? You aren't suggesting . . . ?' Margaret's eyes grew wide with fear.

'I am not suggesting anything. All the same, this will be an embarrassment. We cannot assume that no one knows about it except ourselves. On the contrary, if we are right in thinking it was in the banister. Someone seems to have hidden it there, probably Miss Osgood, as she is the only person mentioned in it who would suffer from its application. Someone, possibly Miss Osgood, took it from the hiding place and either dropped it or hid it in the cellar, leaving there by the window, presumably after hearing you moving about the house. It was then covered by the electrician's gear, and the cellar door had been kept locked, making it very difficult for anyone to get in. Hence the rather clumsy attempts to do so.'

'By Miss Osgood?' said Tom.

'Possibly. But there is this cousin. A more likely person to attack the cellar window, perhaps. He is, according to you, desperate for money, and Miss Osgood has no intention of helping him. If he came to hear of this will he would be as anxious to produce it as she was to conceal it.'

'How could he hear of it?'

'There were two witnesses. They may not have read it: they were only witnessing Mrs Osgood's signature. But we can't count on their ignorance.'

'Surely neither Mrs Holbrook nor Mr Drummond would deliberately get in touch with Christopher Osgood.'

'I don't know,' said Margaret. 'They both felt very bitter over the Osgoods—both mother and daughter.'

Uncle George was not attending to them. He was reading the will again.

'It puts me in a very awkward position,' he said. 'Suppose you bought the house when Miss Osgood was not legally its owner? Where does that put you? And where does it put your mortgage?'

Tom and Margaret looked thoroughly alarmed this time.

'I tell you what,' said Uncle George. 'Say nothing to anyone here, yourselves. I'll take the wretched thing back to London with me this evening, and show it to my own lawyer. He'll tell us what we ought to do. In the meantime, you two cash in on that staircase. You may need it if we find ourselves dispossessed.'

Tom drove Uncle George to the station shortly after six o'clock. Margaret cleared away the tea things, and then, feeling restless after the excitements of the afternoon, took her gardening scissors and basket to the bed under the Howards' wall. She could hear the Commander working on the other side, and was not surprised when presently his head and shoulders appeared.

'Hard at it again?' he asked, unnecessarily.

Margaret nodded.

'I've had a wasted gardening day up till now,' she answered, 'because we've had my Uncle George down.'

'The distinguished and courtly old gentleman in grey I saw from my upper window?'

'The same. He's rather a pet. He's my godfather as well as an uncle, and he's always taken exactly the right interest in me and my affairs, which is not universal these days.'

'By no means. My godfathers never took any interest at all, and they're both dead now, poor souls.'

Bill Howard's cheerful tone as he gave this news seemed to imply that it served them right for their neglect of him. Margaret went on snipping off dead heads, and then, for something to say, as the Commander continued to lean his

elbows on the wall looking down at her, she asked after Buffy.

'Away for the week-end,' said Bill. 'Having a particularly gay time, I gather.'

Margaret said nothing. She wondered if Bill knew she had lent Buffy five pounds, and refused to lend her a further forty. She wondered how much he did know about his wife's shaky financial dealings with her friends and acquaintances, not to mention the tradespeople. And how it was possible for Buffy to go off on a 'particularly' gay week-end when she was so very short of ready money. But perhaps she had persuaded someone else to provide it, or perhaps Bill himself had done so. She looked up at the Commander's happy face, and foresaw a time when it was going to be difficult to have the Howards living next door.

'Do you always use that green string to tie up your flowers?' asked Bill suddenly, leaning well over the wall to watch what she was doing.

'Yes. Why?'

'It fades so quickly. Shows up worse, I always think, when it's gone that dirty yellow. I always use brown. Keeps its colour, and matches the sticks.'

He pulled a handful of bits out of his pocket, and leaning still further over, spread them out on his large hand, flicking away the rubbish, and sorting out several lengths of tarred string.

'Excuse all this filth,' he said. 'My gardening jacket has the most enormous pockets. Very useful, of course, and intended, but everything falls into them.'

Margaret was beginning to explain her objections to tarred string, when Tom strolled across the lawn. She turned round as he approached.

'Did you catch the train?' she asked.

'Uncle George did.'

'That's what I meant.'

'Keep those bits of string if you like,' said Bill Howard, preparing to get down from his perch. 'I'd like you to try them. I feel you're prejudiced.'

'I'm not,' said Margaret. 'It's a genuine feeling. But thanks all the same. I expect I shall stick to my green stuff; I simply hate the smell of tar.'

Bill grinned and disappeared. They heard him begin to wheel his barrow away from the wall.

Tom bent down; he had noticed a collection of fluff and moss on one of the heads of phlox.

'What goes on?' he asked.

'Bill turned all that out of his pocket, looking for his tarred string,' said Margaret.

'Did he?' said Tom. 'Did he indeed?'

He was staring down at a particular specimen of the rubbish, laid out on his palm.

'What is it?' Margaret asked.

'Moss.'

Something in his voice made her look more closely.

'Remember it?' Tom asked. 'You've seen some quite lately. To-day, in fact.'

'In the cellar. When Uncle George found . . .'

Tom lifted his other hand. She stopped speaking, and they both turned to stare at the place so lately occupied by Bill Howard.

'His gardening jacket,' murmured Margaret. 'It has very wide open pockets. He said everything falls into it.'

'Exactly,' said Tom.

IX

THE next morning, when Margaret went downstairs, she was greeted by a whole orchestra of noise. To the usual taps and bangs and thuds was added a clinking of buckets, a splashing of water, a rattling of tin cans. The white-coated gentlemen, four of them, had taken possession of the ground-floor flat.

Margaret went to see them directly after breakfast. In one of the rooms trestles and boards had been set up, and mounted on the boards two extremely young-looking boys slapped and splashed at the ceiling above their heads. In the room next door an older man was tearing damped paper from the walls, while one, more elderly still, was burning off the old paint with a blow lamp. The floors of both rooms were covered with an indescribable mess, but Margaret noted that every sign of the builders' tools and equipment had been removed. It occurred to her that the Retiring Room, hitherto located in the new sitting room, would soon be invaded, and she determined to go there at the end of the first tea-break to discuss with Alf which room of the upstairs flat they could now occupy.

But first she wanted to establish herself with the painters. She spoke to the man who was stripping the walls.

'Good morning,' she said, rather loudly, because the blow-lamp was making a considerable noise. 'I'm very glad to see you. We were hoping to move into this flat not later than a fortnight from now.'

The man in the white coat stopped his sweeping movements.

'We might make it,' he said. 'Depends what you want done.'

'We've discussed it all with Mr Green,' said Margaret. 'Hasn't he told you what to do?'

The man grinned.

'Ladies often like to alter the lay-out,' he said. 'Being on the spot like you are . . .'

'Oh, I wouldn't dare alter it,' said Margaret. 'Besides, my husband and I have gone into the colour schemes most carefully. Hasn't Mr Green . . . ?'

'I'll check up with you, as we go,' said the painter, cautiously.

He plunged his hand into his pocket and pulled out some tattered strips of paper.

'Distemper in all the rooms,' he said.

'Yes,' said Margaret. 'So that we can do it over ourselves when it gets dirty.'

The painter did not look pleased.

'This room is bedroom number two, is it?' he asked.

Margaret shook her head.

'Oh, no. This is the dining room.'

'Dining room. You're having that beege.'

Margaret pulled herself together.

'No,' she said. 'Definitely no. We aren't having any of the rooms be . . . that colour. What I want is a sort of warm light stone.'

'Stone,' said the painter, crossing out beige on his slip of paper.

'Warm light stone,' said Margaret. 'I think you get it by mixing some red into white, but I'm not quite sure.'

The painter looked as if he were far from sure himself.

'I'll get up my colour card after lunch,' he said. 'Then you can pick out what you mean.'

'I don't think it's on the colour cards,' said Margaret. 'Or not the usual ones you see in shops.'

'I expect I can fix you up with what you want,' said the painter, and turned back to the wall he had been attacking.

By the afternoon the two rooms were prepared.

'We aren't doing too badly,' said the painter, whose name turned out to be Len. 'Those walls were pretty good

under the paper, and the ceilings too. Very little filling in needed, which makes a big difference to the time we take. We needn't burn off in that other room across the hall, unless you want it.'

'In my bedroom, you mean?'

Len consulted another scrap of paper.

'Bedroom number one. That would be it. French grey.

It doesn't say what you want the ceiling.'

'French grey.'

'All over?'

'Yes, please. And the paint to match.'

Len looked very doubtful.

'Ceilings take a darker tone than what the walls do in the same colour. Hadn't we better tone it down a bit on the ceiling?'

'Look,' said Margaret, 'I want the whole room the same colour, including the ceiling, if you can make it work out like that.'

They were standing in the hall while this conversation took place. Len turned abruptly, and walked into the bedroom.

'These new plastered walls may not come up quite the same shade on two coats of distemper,' he said. 'But if not I'll give them a third. You really want the ceiling grey, do you, madam?'

'Yes, I really do,' said Margaret, patiently.

In this room the painters had not burned off the paint. Now that it had been washed and the small cracks puttied, it looked in remarkably good condition. So did the walls, stripped of the ugly faded floral paper Mrs Osgood had preserved on them.

Margaret moved across the room to the window and then back to the fireplace. The floor was being washed over by one of the very young boys. She watched him cross a darkened patch about a yard from the fireplace. Here the wood was roughened, and she realised, as she had not done before, the significance of these charred boards. At the same time a question formed in her mind.

'Don't you think,' she asked the painter, 'it is very strange that the fire in this room did so little damage? I mean, in the accident, the fire that caused Mrs Osgood's death.'

'From what I've heard,' said Len, cautiously, 'her daughter's friends were right on the spot, and put it out before it got a hold.'

'Yes. They did. But I'd have expected a blaze like that, started by the gas fire, would have caught the paint of the fireplace and some of the furniture or the ornaments. My daily, Mrs Holbrook, who worked for Mrs Osgood, says the room was chock-full of things—a real Victorian room.'

'They were on the spot too quick for it,' persisted Len. 'The old lady got her rug alight, I heard. It was over her knees. She must have fallen off her chair away from the fire, I should think. That mark on the floor was made by the chair, or would it be the rug?'

'Miss Osgood bundled up the rug with her bare hands. She was badly burned.'

'Take some pluck to do that,' said Len, admiringly.

'Yes, indeed. I think she threw it out of the window. I'm not sure. They rolled Mrs Osgood in a blanket.'

'The mark on the floor could have been her, then.'

'Perhaps it was. No one mentions a burning chair.'

Len seemed to have lost interest in the subject of Mrs Osgood's accident, so Margaret left him to mix up his distempers, and went into the garden. But her mind was still upon the well-marked and circumscribed area of the bedroom floor, and though she and Tom looked at it and measured it and discussed it at great length that evening after dinner, they went to bed as ignorant as before of its significance.

Early next day Margaret consulted Mrs Holbrook, but did not find her very helpful. She seemed to have got over her dislike of the bedroom, however, and followed Margaret inside, during the tea-break, without any kind of hesitation.

'It mightn't be the same house,' she said, with a satisfied air. 'I think they've done wonders.'

They could not linger in the room, because already the trestles were in place, and the boys ready to put the first coat of grey distemper on to the ceiling. In any case Mrs Holbrook had little to say about the burned floor.

'What sort of chair was Mrs Osgood sitting in?' Margaret asked, as they went upstairs to make the bed. 'Some sort of armchair, I suppose?'

'Yes,' answered Mrs Holbrook. 'She always sat in the same chair. Old-fashioned kind, narrow, and not deep, if you get my meaning. It was only to be expected she'd find it hard to get out of it when the fire started, wedged in like she always was, a big stout woman, too, and that rug tucked in round the sides.'

'Do you mean she was actually *in* the chair when they found her?'

'That's what I've always understood,' said Mrs Holbrook. 'It looked like it from the way the arms of the chair was burnt, either side.'

'That's very extraordinary,' Margaret said. 'Do you mean the rest of the chair was not damaged?'

'When I see it the next day,' said Mrs Holbrook, very deliberately, 'which was up the garden shed because they couldn't bear to set eyes on it,—Miss Osgood and her mother, I mean,—the upholstery was all hanging in cinders off the arms, but the frame of it wasn't touched. It could have been mended, easy, but of course it had to be destroyed. Oh, yes. That was Miss Osgood all over.'

Remembering the episode of the old clothes, Margaret kept a tactful silence.

'If you ask me,' said Mrs Holbrook, 'I'd say it was the rug made that mark on the floor.'

'Of course,' said Margaret. 'I thought it couldn't be the rug, but it could, really. Miss Osgood pulled it away, and beat out the flames with her hands. But she probably stamped on it, too. Anyway, it would be partly on the floor, and quite enough to burn off the top surface. Oh, no,

not through the carpet. Was there a carpet? It wouldn't be enough to burn a hole right through the carpet and burn the floor underneath. Not if it was put out so quickly.'

'There were rugs,' answered Mrs Holbrook. 'Persian rugs, end to end. Valuable rugs. In my opinion Miss Osgood kicked them out of the way when she was handling the rug. She wouldn't want them destroyed.'

'Do you think she would bother about a thing like that at such a moment?'

'She'd bother about anything that touched her purse,' said Mrs Holbrook, sourly.

Margaret was careful not to be drawn by this. She changed the subject by asking if the rug had shared the fate of the chair.

'There wasn't any need for it,' said Mrs Holbrook. 'Total destruction, there. Commander Howard threw it out into the garden after Mrs Osgood was taken in charge of by the doctor, and it must have gone on smouldering. She didn't put it all out, I reckon. There was a shower or two next day, I remember, that would stop it. When they come to find it later, it was nothing but a heap of ashes. The mark on the grass was there all that winter. I believe it still looks sickly; the grass, I mean.'

'I see,' said Margaret, discounting this over-dramatised conclusion.

'It was a shame that were destroyed,' said Mrs Holbrook. 'A lovely rug it was. Soft and fleecy. Miss Osgood had it made for her mother, special, in the Shetlands. Wonderful wearing, too. She'd had it the best part of four years, to my knowledge. Miss Osgood always washed it herself; never sent it to be cleaned. The last time she washed it was only a couple of weeks before the accident. I remember it was a warm spell and she took the opportunity, Mrs Osgood not needing it, to wash it and dry it on the line up the garden. A lovely rug.'

'Rather a treacherous rug, though,' said Margaret. 'I don't see, all the same, how she could get it alight. Unless she kept it round her a bit while she bent over the gas fire,

and then—yes—then it might slip a bit and catch fire, and she screamed for help, and with her bad heart collapsed back into her chair, and couldn't throw it off or get up again.'

'Something of the kind,' agreed Mrs Holbrook. 'That was what the coroner said at the inquest, almost word for word.'

For the rest of that day Margaret waited impatiently for Tom's return, in order to discuss with him the curious details she had extracted from Mrs Holbrook. But when he arrived, all thought of her own discoveries vanished from her mind under the impact of his news.

'Uncle George,' he said, almost before he was inside the house, 'has been robbed!'

'What!'

'Of his brief-case. On the way up to London yesterday.'

'Did he have a brief-case with him? I don't think I noticed.'

'*Did he have a brief-case?* Where did you think he put the will?'

Margaret looked at him, aghast.

'You don't mean to say the will has gone?'

'Naturally, since it was in the case. And several papers he'd been reading on the way down. And his library book. But that was only a detective, he says, and he had already guessed the solution.'

'The library will want their copy back, nevertheless.'

'Oh, quite. The papers were duplicates. What he is most furious about is the case itself, which was a very good one, and quite valuable, and a present from a very old friend. No doubt the case was the reason for the theft.'

'How did it happen? When did you hear?'

'He came storming round to my office at one o'clock to-day, in a taxi, which he left waiting outside. He dragged me off at once to the Athenæum, where he gave me lunch and the story combined. I have never in my life seen him so moved.'

‘Why did he want to tell it to you, particularly?’

‘Partly, I think, because it happened on his way home from here.’

‘Oh! In the train?’

‘Yes. Partly, of course, because he had that will in the case, and he wanted to know if I would mind if he called in the police to trace his property.’

‘I see what you mean. If it was found and the contents noted it might be thought rather strange of us not to take the will at once to Miss Osgood. In the circumstances, it could be made to look distinctly queer, couldn’t it?’

‘I thought so, when Uncle George put it like that. But I advised him to get the police on to it, all the same. There’s too much of this casual theft in public places. One’s luggage, on trains, always used to be reasonably safe.’

‘Did Uncle George say how it happened?’

‘He doesn’t know. He couldn’t very well, could he? He was in one of those enormous new carriages with seats back to back and a luggage rack above. He put the brief-case on the luggage rack: actually, I saw him do that before the train started. He sat down and did not think of the case again until his train reached Wimbledon. Then he thought he would read his book for the rest of the way, because he hates the sight of the slums between there and Waterloo. He got up to lift down the brief-case and it had vanished.’

‘Was there anything else on that rack?’

‘I asked him the same question. Yes, there were several objects. Most of the people who got in at the various stations along the route threw something up into the rack, a mackintosh, a suitcase, a brief-case, a tennis racket. Various things. He was looking out of the window all the time and paid no attention to any of them, or what they were doing. There was no reason why he should.’

‘None whatever. One doesn’t expect to have to guard things on a local line on Sunday evening.’

‘Absolutely anyone sitting on the seat, back to back

with him, could have taken the case, quite naturally, as if it was their own, and walked off with it. If Uncle George had happened to look up, and object, they would simply have apologised for getting hold of the wrong handle, and put it down. For an experienced shop-lifter it was a dead snip.'

'Or even an inexperienced one.'

They were both silent after this. Then Margaret said, 'I must write him a note. Poor Uncle George! He won't have very happy memories of Fairlawn.'

'He doesn't hold it against us,' said Tom. 'He told me not to worry.'

'Bless his heart! He's rather a pet, isn't he?'

After dinner Margaret wrote a sympathetic letter to her uncle, and took it down the drive to the pillar box on the corner, so that it would catch the first post in the morning. When she got back to the house she found Tom at the telephone.

'Uncle George,' he said, out of the corner of his mouth.

She drew near, and Tom held the receiver a little way from his ear so that she could listen.

'... at the other end of the same train,' said Uncle George, completing a sentence 'I'll keep you informed.'

He rang off.

'But . . . but what has happened?' asked Margaret, eagerly.

'The brief-case,' said Tom, 'has been found. It was found, as you heard Uncle George repeat at the end of his call, in another carriage of the train he was in. A railway official recovered it at Waterloo. The police advised Uncle George to ask at the Lost Property Office there, on the broad-minded theory that some honest soul took it by mistake and would turn it in. *But*, and this is the reason for the call, and a very sinister reason, too, the will is missing from the case. The library book is there, and the other papers, *but not the will*.'

'Oh, dear,' said Margaret, and sat down quickly in the nearest chair.

When she had recovered a little she said, 'Who was in the carriage with Uncle George when it left Shipworth?'

'Half a dozen people,' answered Tom. 'I didn't recognise any of them.'

'Not . . . not, by any chance—Buffy Howard?'

'Not unless she was heavily disguised.'

'I can't laugh,' said Margaret, despairingly. 'I just think the whole thing's horrible.'

'I know.' Tom walked over to the window, and stood with his back to her. 'It's also an open challenge. But I can't for the life of me see who could know the will was in Uncle George's case. Who would know, even, that we'd found it? And discussed it. And made a plan.'

'That's it,' said Margaret. 'That must be it.'

Tom turned to look at her.

'They knew,' said Margaret, 'so they must have heard. So they must have been somewhere in the house. It's big enough to hide in, and easy enough, too, with all these alterations and empty rooms, and us living all over it, more or less.'

'If that is so,' said Tom, 'and I don't see any other explanation, it is someone who knows the house well, and *has a key*.'

'We don't lock up in the day time,' Margaret reminded him. 'Anyone could walk in, and most of Shipworth knows the lay-out by now.'

'Agreed,' said Tom. 'And it points the fact that the early intruder by night must have had a house key, at least. And who could that be? Definitely not the vicar.'

'I gave him up ages ago,' said Margaret.

'Miss Osgood is the obvious bet, and for the will snatching, too. Only I should have recognised her on the station.'

'Not if she got into another carriage while you were seeing Uncle George into his. She could transfer at the next station, and back again later.'

'True. Who else?'

'The cousin. He's sure to have got a key: that type

would. He was always turning up unexpectedly, late at night, Mrs Holbrook told me.'

'But he was still in prison when the night visitor came. No. He wasn't. He was just out, I think. We'd better check that. It can't be Miss Osgood. She wouldn't want to *keep* the will, only *destroy* it. I was never convinced when Uncle George suspected her of hiding it.'

'What about Bill? He won't have a key to the house, but he wouldn't need it by day, as you pointed out. And he did have some of our cellar moss in his pocket.'

'I don't want it to be Bill.'

'Nor do I. Especially not when I think of the use he could put that will to. On Buffy's behalf.'

Tom flung himself restlessly into a chair.

'And we can't do a thing,' he grumbled. 'Not a single damned thing. Uncle George pointed that out. The will was not our business, valid or otherwise. But I should like to know what happens to Fairlawn if someone produces it, and gets it proved.'

X

MARGARET heard the news from Mrs Drummond. In the ordinary way the vicar's wife gave her a cordial greeting as they passed one another on the road, but she seldom stopped to speak, unless she wanted Margaret's help with the church flowers or some other matter connected with her husband's calling. But on the Wednesday morning after Uncle George's ill-fated visit to Shipworth, Mrs Drummond crossed the road on purpose to accost her.

'Have you heard the latest?' she said, eagerly.

'Which latest?' Margaret asked, cautiously. Her mind flickered over the recent births, deaths, and marriages in the neighbourhood, but could not fasten on anything calculated to bring such a bright gleam into Mrs Drummond's usually dull eyes, nor such a glow to her sallow cheeks.

'Then you haven't, obviously,' said Mrs Drummond. She paused to lower her voice to an impressive half-whisper. 'Christopher Osgood is staying at Bankside!'

'Oh!' said Margaret. 'Staying with Miss Osgood, do you mean?'

'Yes. At Bankside. We knew he was down for the day on Sunday, but . . . Did you speak?'

'No,' said Margaret, whose sudden intake of breath at this news had checked Mrs Drummond. 'No. I—I rhought I was going to sneeze. Do go on.'

'On Sunday. But no one expected to see him still here on Monday, much less on *Wednesday*, actually mowing her lawn for her.'

'I suppose it is rather surprising,' said Margaret, mildly. 'I'm afraid I don't know much about him, except that he

has been—difficult—and in trouble. The sort of things my Mrs Holbrook knows.'

'Then you can imagine what an imposition it is, planting himself on poor Laura,' said Mrs Drummond, indignantly. 'Just when her trials seemed to be at an end, and she could look forward to a quiet time in her charming little new home. To have that detestable fellow taking advantage of her good nature. Weakness, I call it. It's all very well for Lionel to praise the spirit of charity in her. It won't do any good. This man is incorrigible. Mrs Osgood was like a mother to him when he was a boy, and left homeless, and look how he repaid her. It will be just the same with Laura, if she lets him take advantage. Sheer weakness and generosity.'

This was such a strangely different picture from the one that Mrs Holbrook had built up in Margaret's mind that she felt inclined to laugh. She managed, however, to look grave, and to say in a becomingly severe voice. 'Her friends will have to protect her.'

'That's exactly what I told Lionel,' said Mrs Drummond. 'If Christopher begins his usual little games, drinking, and making the village boys bet on horses, and worse things, you can well imagine, I'm sure, then Lionel will have to make him go.'

'Could he?' asked Margaret, really interested this time.

Mrs Drummond flushed.

'He could try,' she said shortly, and almost at once took her leave and went on her way.

Margaret continued on hers, which took her to the bus stop. Here she joined the morning queue for the bus into Oldford, five miles away. She had not been waiting more than three minutes when Buffy Howard came up.

'Going into Oldford?' the latter asked, unnecessarily.

'Yes. Are you?'

'Must. Completely out of coffee, and Bill won't drink the local brand, far less anything out of a tin.'

They discussed their shopping lists until the bus came up, when they climbed on board and sat down side by side.

'I should have thought you'd take the car in,' said Buffy, as the bus sped on its way.

'Not with petrol the price it is now,' answered Margaret. 'The bus is cheaper, and not really inconvenient. I'm thinking of getting a bike. The boys take theirs to school or I wouldn't mind riding one of them. I had one of my own in the war, when there wasn't any petrol, but I stupidly got rid of it when they stopped rationing.'

'I'm afraid I'm not energetic enough to ride a bicycle,' said Buffy.

When they arrived at the terminus in Oldford Buffy waited for Margaret to follow her off the bus, and then slipped her arm through hers.

'Have coffee with me,' she said.

'Oh, I don't think . . .'

'It's on me,' said Buffy. 'I mean it. Do. I've something important to tell you. Please.'

Margaret's heart sank. These must be the preliminaries to a fresh attempt on Buffy's part to borrow money from her. She would have to be very firm, even rude, if necessary.

'I've masses of shopping,' she said, untruthfully. 'And it'll be a frightful scramble to get it all in before the next bus goes back. I want to get home not later than half-past twelve.'

'You'll do it easily,' said Buffy. 'It's barely half-past ten. Come on. Shipworth is simply quivering with excitement to-day on account of Chris Osgood. Did you know he was back?'

'Mrs Drummond told me on my way to the bus stop.'

'We were never more surprised when he walked in on Sunday.'

Margaret instantly changed her mind. The bad cousin, the suspect, the known criminal, next door to Fairlawn on Sunday last!

'I *must* hear about him,' she said. 'Tell me while we have coffee.'

There was not very much to tell. Christopher Osgood had blown in, Buffy said, between tea and supper. At drinks time, as he always did. He had had two quick ones in rapid succession while he described a wonderful job at an aero works that had been found for him by the Welfare Officer at the prison. The only snag was it didn't begin for a week or two, so he was obliged to stay on at Bankside. He did not care much for Bankside, he had told them; the rooms were too small. Then he had looked at his watch, said he would be late, and pushed off with hardly a word of thanks.

'Late for what?' asked Margaret.

'He didn't say. Church, perhaps.'

Buffy laughed at her own joke, but Margaret could only manage a smile. Late at the station, seemed more likely.

'I haven't met him,' she said aloud, continuing her train of thought. 'I don't know what he looks like.'

'You haven't missed anything,' said Buffy. 'He isn't bad-looking, really, but very gone to seed. He must be well into the forties by now. Actually he looks younger at the moment, and much healthier than usual. The diet and the work in clink have done him good. But he's an out-and-out wrong 'un, of course. And now he's so very middle-aged, the smooth manner and the gay chat rather grate.'

'He sounds revolting,' said Margaret. 'But I should like to meet him.'

'How depraved!' answered Buffy. 'I'll see if I can manage it for you.'

They had finished their coffee and Margaret had learned as much and more than she had expected. It was time to go. She began to look about for the waitress, and wondered if she could possibly stave off the embarrassment she feared. But Buffy was watching too, and when the bill came, took it up quickly.

'Pay at the desk? Right,' she said, and slipped a sixpence for the waitress under her saucer. She began to search in her bag, and Margaret's heart sank. But to her

astonishment, after considerable delving, and turning out a compact, a cigarette-case, and a lighter, on to the table, Buffy drew out an envelope and pushed it across the table to Margaret.

'Sorry to have been such an age,' she said. 'You'd better count them. Five, wasn't it?'

Margaret was too surprised and confused by her recent unjust thought to answer at once. She counted the edges of the notes without taking them from the envelope. There were five.

'Thanks, awfully,' she said, trying to keep her astonishment out of her voice.

'Such a load off the mind,' said Buffy, warmly. 'I've been clearing up quite strenuously this week. There's only that heavenly frock to pay for, and I'm in the clear. Wasn't it lucky it was ruined at the party? The cleaners have got the stain right out. But if it hadn't happened, I should have had to send it back. I'm going along to the dress shop now to pay the bill.'

Margaret could scarcely believe what she heard, but she managed to smile and to congratulate her neighbour. It was only after Buffy had left her and she was fumbling in her bag for her shopping-list that the unworthy thought came to her, to wonder how and whence Buffy's new prosperity had come to her.

The surprises of that day were not yet over. Mr Drummond, the vicar, telephoned during the afternoon to ask if he could speak to Tom some time during the evening. Margaret could not object to this, whatever she felt Tom might say to her later, so an appointment was made, and Margaret tactfully went out to water the sweet peas while the visit took place. Afterwards Tom called her back into the house.

'It was about the staircase again,' he told her.

'I thought it might be. What did you say?'

'I said we had had an expert down to look at it, which is true, and that we understood the dealer was going to

give us a very substantial sum for it, which was chiefly optimism.'

'No, it wasn't. Uncle George was certain it was very valuable; he's always right about such things.'

'Nevertheless we have not actually had an offer.'

'Did the vicar make one?'

'No. He swallowed his surprise at our knowledge, and asked straight away if we would allow him to get his own expert in to value it.'

'Has he come in for a fortune, too?'

'Either that, or the ecclesiastical authorities think they are on to a good thing. I understand they make the parish a grant for repairs and development, but I think it is extremely unlikely that they would think Shipworth Church sufficiently important to buy the staircase for the sole purpose of enriching it. Though, as Drummond said, next year is the centenary of the birth of the carpenter who carved it, and a little fuss is to be made about him, including a place in the pageant they are going to do in Northbury Cathedral Close next summer.'

'So that's it!' exclaimed Margaret. 'Someone in the church is shocked to think the staircase, a major work of our local artist, may be sold as lumber, or bought for an immense price to embellish a frame-house in the States. Or don't frame-houses have staircases?'

'I shouldn't think they'd buy them in England. I expect you're right about the church, though, unless the simple explanation still holds. Drummond wants it for what he, personally, can get out of it. Or thinks he can.'

'Then we are back where we were. And how could he raise enough money?'

Tom was silent for a time.

'We need to do some sorting out,' he said, at last, 'and now would seem to be a good time. Things have been happening in Shipworth: all these things appeared to be far apart to begin with, to have no connection with each other. But following them to the position we have to-day, they have come remarkably close together.'

'That sounds wonderful,' said Margaret. 'I do admire the way you express yourself; absolutely Third Programme, instructional. But I don't understand a word you say.'

'Two basic facts,' said Tom, taking an old envelope from his pocket and holding out his hand for a pencil, which Margaret hastened to supply. He took up a book, as background for the envelope, and began to write as he spoke.

'One. Our home is entered, purpose unknown, during the night, but connection with staircase suspected. Two. A will, possibly authentic, is discovered in the cellar. What conclusion, if any, do we draw from this?'

'Someone thought, or knew, the will was in the staircase; anyway, they looked there, but they dropped it in the cellar, and couldn't get it back, because we kept it locked.'

'Not very clear. It would be advisable next, I think, to consider agents in all this. Christopher Osgood is the most likely.'

'The Howards,' said Margaret. 'Bill acting on behalf of Buffy.'

'The vicar.'

'Miss Osgood herself?'

'Yes,' said Tom, in some excitement. 'You've got something there. We never thought of it, but naturally she will have keys of Fairlawn, and can come in and out as she pleases.'

'She's not supposed to have,' said Margaret. 'She handed over three when we came into possession.'

'She could perfectly well have kept one if she had any reason to want it. We don't know how many there were.'

'That applies to Christopher, too. We suspected him before of having a key. Yes,' continued Margaret eagerly. 'And neither of them would have the cellar key, because we put on a new lock when we came.'

'Then how could they escape by the cellar the first time we heard noises? We were keeping it locked. We decided they went that way the first time, and afterwards couldn't. Especially Miss Osgood, if you remember?'

'I do. I suppose it's just possible it was left open that

night. Mr Stokes was up and down the cellar stairs all day that week. It could have been overlooked. I wonder if he'd remember?'

'Not very likely. *Now*,' said Tom, with great emphasis, 'we have all these people, and we have a will, which is of great importance to them.'

'Surely not to the Howards,' put in Margaret.

'Wait. Which is of great importance to Miss Osgood, who might conceivably have to refund the money we paid her for the house. Which is of great importance to Christopher, as the next heir, who might be awarded that money, or might prefer to blackmail his cousin, as being a more certain and more continuous supply of income. She adores her Bankside, but she would have to sell it if the will was proved. Chris is staying there now, I think you said.'

'Blackmail,' said Margaret. 'You aren't suggesting the Howards knew of the will and are blackmailing poor old Laura as well?'

'Could be,' said Tom. 'You got your money back, didn't you?'

'Oh, how revolting!' said Margaret. 'I do wish I hadn't lent it.'

'Let it be a lesson to you.'

'The vicar!' exclaimed Margaret.

'Yes, the vicar. Mr Drummond witnessed Mrs Osgood's signature on that will. He may or may not have read it or been told its provisions.'

'He *couldn't* be blackmailing, too,' said Margaret, in an awed voice. 'Even if he does seem to be able to buy our valuable staircase. You might as well add Mrs Holbrook. She witnessed the signature, too.'

'So she did.'

'Poor Miss Osgood! That would be the last word in irony: her former staircase, which her mother refused to leave to the church.'

'Well, there we are,' said Tom, folding up his notes, and putting them in his pocket. 'Take your pick.'

'I can't,' said Margaret. 'And now I don't want to. At least, not until I've actually seen Christopher in the flesh.'

But the next evening found her much more decided.

'It's between the Osgoods, for certain,' she said, as soon as Tom arrived home. 'I saw them both to-day, in the village. She looks ghastly: ten years older, and more sallow than ever. He's a typical "wide boy", I think it's called. What I should describe as an obvious rotter.'

'A much better word,' said Tom.

'I'm certain he's got a hold over her. She was quite unlike herself. She hardly smiled at me as I passed, and hurried on to avoid introducing him. But he stopped and stared, and then quite blatantly called her back. And she came, and they caught me up, and she introduced him. I got away as soon as I could. It would have been comic, if it hadn't been so sinister.'

'Sure your imagination is not leading you astray?'

'I don't think so. It gets worse the more you think of it. I mean, Bankside coming on the market so conveniently, just when Mrs Osgood died, or Mrs Osgood dying so conveniently, just when Bankside came on the market.'

'Your imagination has certainly been working overtime,' said Tom. 'Are you seriously suggesting that Mrs Osgood was *murdered*?'

'I don't know.' Margaret made a little helpless gesture. 'You should have seen that pair, as I did, Miss Osgood so—broken, and the man so bold and insolent, and sure of himself. Would he be like that, unless he knew he'd brought off something stupendous?'

'You are assuming that he somehow contrived Mrs Osgood's death, so that the new will could operate. How did he know of this will?'

'He could have. He visited Mrs Osgood before he was arrested, just about the time the will was drawn up.'

'But we don't know when that was. It was not dated.'

'Yes, it was. I don't remember the date, but Uncle George pointed it out. The end of June, I'm sure.'

'Furthermore, he was in prison when Mrs Osgood had her accident'

'Yes I'm being silly I thought he was so horrible when I saw him And then I thought what a queer little fire it was that killed Mrs Osgood, and I remembered that case of the young man who killed his mother in a hotel by setting fire to her chair'

'In that connection why not suspect Miss Osgood? In order to stop the new will operating?'

'Did she know of it? Even if she did, she had only to get hold of it and destroy it'

'Yes She would be the last person to hide it in the stair case and go to such lengths to keep it That would be Christopher's part'

'And he was out of prison when we had our first nocturnal visit, and had been down to see Laura once at about the right date'

'Oh, hell!' said Margaret 'My head's spinning'

'And I do think Christopher took Uncle George's brief case,' said Tom 'He was in Shipworth that day, he was at the Howards next door between tea and supper and went off from there in a hurry, just about the right time to get to the station for that train I'm sure I should have noticed any of our other suspects at the station because I know them so well'

'In any case the vicar was in church taking evensong, Margaret reminded him 'Probably Miss Osgood was there too We could easily find out from Mrs Drummond'

'True On the other hand, we have no positive evidence that either Miss Osgood or her cousin knew of the will The only people we are certain of are Mr Drummond and Mrs Holbrook'

'I never seriously meant that Mrs Osgood was murdered Only that Christopher looks capable of anything'

'We could bear it in mind, though' said Tom

In the end there was quite a little fuss over the staircase Mr Drummond's expert examined it and was delighted

Negotiations followed, in which it became quite clear that the church had a financial backer of some weight who wished to remain anonymous. As the generous unknown was willing to pay more than Uncle George's dealer, the staircase was preserved for Shipworth, with satisfaction all round. This even included a visit from the Bishop of Northbury, who begged Margaret as a favour to allow the staircase to be photographed before its removal. Uncle George persuaded his elderly acquaintance to write a little account of the 'Osgood Legend'. This, neatly typed, was sent to the Bishop, Mr Drummond, Miss Osgood, the churchwarden at Shipworth, and the Seeleys, Uncle George keeping a copy for himself. After a delay of rather more than a fortnight, a band of foreign labour, under the direction of an antiquarian, removed the staircase, banisters and treads and rails and posts, and took it, parcelled and labelled in sections, by road to London, in a large black van.

It was several days before Saunders' men recovered from the shock and insult of having a substantial part of their work snatched from them. But Margaret gave them a true and frank account of the reason for these proceedings, and since they became aware that it would reflect nothing but credit and glory upon Shipworth to have the church embellished, they became reconciled, and set to upon building the new rooms in the space that was left.

Tom and Margaret now had to use the back stairs.

'And we never discovered,' said Tom, a few days later, 'who the wealthy philanthropist really was.'

'Does it matter?' asked Margaret. 'After all, the Bishop knew, and he didn't seem to think it peculiar.'

Tom shrugged his shoulders.

XI

WORK on the Seeleys' flat was nearly complete. The decorators would have to wait for a few weeks before they could finish the new room built in the well of the staircase; but apart from that, and a few final touches to the paint in the hall, they were ready to take themselves upstairs to the top flat, which stood ready for their attention. Alf had again moved the Retiring Room. The boards and tins and trestles, the tools and the coats and caps, were now housed in the former pantry. This gave the men very little space to turn round in, but as Alf said, 'Once the Gas have been to move your cooker, we'll get you out of the old kitchen. Then we'll have this side of the house to ourselves.'

But the Gas Board, as usual, was in no hurry to finish its work. Instructions, no doubt, were moving, like a meteorological depression, slowly eastwards, towards the local headquarters, but it took time. And after arrival, they had to move back again. This took longer. Margaret found that telephone calls only confused the issue more, so she gave it up, and waited with all the patience she could muster.

Then, suddenly, there was a day of panic, when the men arrived to move the cooking stove, but the meter had not yet been installed.

'Surely it ought to come first?' Margaret said, anxiously.

The men smiled at her ignorance.

'That's another department,' they said.

'I don't care what it is,' Margaret cried, indignantly. 'If you move the stove now, and there's no meter, how can I use it? It won't be connected.'

'That's right,' said the men.

'Then how can you move it? I won't have anything to cook on.'

The men were silent, looking at each other, and wishing the questions would stop.

'Aren't you supposed to see the stove is working properly when you fix it?' asked Margaret. 'Or do you just connect it up, and leave it?'

This stung their pride.

'We leave it working,' they said, sulkily.

'How can you do that if the gas isn't on?'

Again they looked at one another.

'If you want to telephone,' said Margaret, 'I'll show you where the 'phone is. The telephone people came to move *it*, the day after we told them what we wanted.'

Whether the gas men were roused by this comparison, or realised on their own account the need for action, Margaret was never certain, but in the event the stove was moved during the morning, and the meters for the two flats, in the care of a special envoy, arrived during the afternoon. The one for the Seeleys' flat was connected up with the main in the corner of the hall, just inside the front door. An extra length of piping was needed to take the supply up through the roof of the hall to the floor above, where the second meter was installed.

When Tom came home that day, entering by the back door of the house as usual, he found the old kitchen deserted, with litter on the floor, and the carpenter's tool bag near the wall. Margaret's voice hailed him as he went along the passage towards the new flat.

'Come and look!' she called. 'Everything's working, and I've moved us into the dining room, and when you're ready, just go to the other side of the hatch, and I'll send the dinner through. Oh, darling, isn't this *wonderful*!'

A couple of days after this excitement, the Gas Board sent round their official to read the meters. He had several cards in his hand, and was in a state of great mental confusion until Margaret explained the alterations to him.

'So you've finished with the old meter?' he said. 'I must read that, to complete your account on it.'

Margaret took him down to the cellar to do so. The meter reader looked about him.

'Will this meter be in any further use?' he asked.

'Oh, yes. The cellar will form part of the semi-detached house. Actually, it is under the old kitchen, you see.'

She unfastened the window for the gas man to look out and take his bearings. When he put his head in again, she fastened the window, noting with satisfaction that there were no signs of any further tampering with its panes or bolts.

The meter reader went back to the hall with her.

'The reading on your meter was taken the other day, when you were first connected,' he said. 'The small amount used from then till to-day will be added to the reading for the current quarter.'

'So I shall have three amounts when it next comes in?' said Margaret. 'One for the old meter, and two for this.'

'This is just a check on its working. The regular reading will be made next month. I expect they'll put these two small amounts together on the one account.'

Margaret held out her hand. A thought had struck her.

'May I look at the card, please. The old one, I mean.'

He handed it to her. It went back some way in time, though in the consumption of gas there was a long stationary period.

'All those identical figures mean the time the house was empty, I suppose?' asked Margaret. 'After Miss Osgood left, until we came in.'

'Not exactly.' The meter reader took the card back, looked at it again, and then pointed out two rows of figures.

'There was no gas used the last quarter the Osgoods were here,' he said.

'No—gas?'

'No gas.'

'But . . .' Margaret remembered. 'Oh, of course, they

had an electric cooking stove. I bought the gas cooker from Miss Osgood, and I remember she said she hadn't used it for a couple of years because she preferred an electric one, but the gas cooker was in good working order, so I could have it if I liked.'

The man nodded. He was stacking his cards together when Margaret exclaimed again.

'But that still isn't right; it can't be! They cooked by electricity, but they had some gas. They must have. There were the fires!'

'The Osgoods had three gas fires altogether,' said the man. 'Two upstairs and one downstairs.'

'Bedroom fires. Yes, I know. I bought one of them. We didn't want the others.'

'It was the summer quarter,' said the meter reader. 'Not surprising they didn't use any gas. Most people economise on fires in the summer.'

'Economise—yes,' said Margaret. 'But Mrs Osgood was an invalid.'

The meter reader turned to go.

'I always understood,' he said carefully, looking down the drive, 'that the old lady had a prejudice against the gas fire in her room. She as much as told me so once. I wouldn't be surprised to hear she gave up using that fire altogether in the summer. Good afternoon, madam. Thank you.'

'So how on earth *did* she get alight?' said Margaret, finishing her story.

'It accounts for the confusion about who turned the fire off,' said Tom. 'No one turned it off, because it never was on.'

'*Then how did she get alight?*'

'It's a fair stumper,' said Tom.

They considered the problem.

'You'd have thought the coroner would want to know,' said Margaret, after a time.

'Coroners are not always legal chaps,' answered Tom.

'And it isn't a police court. This one may be an ex-doctor. They often are. In which case he would be more interested in the purely medical side. After all, she died of heart failure following shock, rather than of burns. Everyone assumes that she had her fire on, because the weather had turned cold. Nobody cares much who turned it off. Come to that, she might have turned it off herself before collapsing. We always get back to that heart trouble of hers, you see. Presumably if she had been a hale and hearty old lady, she would have been able to put out the rug herself before the fire got a hold.'

'Yes, I see what you mean,' said Margaret. 'The coroner would make that assumption, wouldn't he, if he did ask who turned off the fire and found that none of the rescuers did so? I suppose we couldn't possibly see the actual record of the proceedings?'

'No. We aren't the police. The best we can do is to get hold of old copies of the local paper. Oldford has a *Gazette*, hasn't it? They usually do important local thrills in great detail. I should think, as the Osgoods were such an old-established family in Shipworth, they would get maximum publicity.'

Margaret nodded. She was troubled by the facts the meter reader had given her.

'We still haven't thought of any way she could get alight,' she said. 'You know, I believe Mrs Holbrook has had her doubts from the start. She knew Mrs Osgood didn't like the fire. Mrs Holbrook used to avoid going into that room, until the alterations were finished. Almost as if she was afraid it might go up in smoke again. She said to me quite early on that it was brought in an accident, and she said it in the tone of voice that means "that's all they know". I wonder if she could suggest something. The village seems to have theories.'

'Better ask her. But I don't think dark hints will get us anywhere. You're still running the horror line, aren't you? The accident contrived. The old lady murdered, either by Laura Osgood to secure Bankside, or by Christopher

Osgood to secure the provisions of the second will, knowing that Laura would not stay at Fairlawn. As both of them have complete alibis for the time of the accident, I think it's pretty pointless. And, after all, there are other ways of starting a fire besides having one conveniently alight in a room.'

'Such as?'

'Matches, burning, dropped on an inflammable material. Cigarette ends, not out, dropped ditto. Burning glass effects . . .'

'I wonder if Mrs Osgood smoked,' interrupted Margaret. 'That is something I could ask Mrs Holbrook.'

'Go about it very carefully, then,' said Tom. 'We don't want to start a new batch of rumours.'

Margaret soon found the opportunity she wanted. This was on the day when she and Mrs Holbrook polished and arranged the furniture in the new sitting room.

Alf and two of the other men carried it down for them after the carpet was laid, and for the rest of the day they worked at it as though it were the season of spring cleaning.

'The new curtains look lovely, I must say,' said Mrs Holbrook. 'Such a lovely shade. You didn't get that material in Oldford, I don't suppose.'

'No. I got it in London,' said Margaret.

'It was only to be expected you would,' said Mrs Holbrook.

As Margaret was not sure if this remark implied censure or approbation, she said nothing, but began to distribute a trayful of ornaments about the room.

'We do seem to have thousands of ashtrays,' she said. 'But I suppose it's just as well. Mr Seeley is not always very clever with his pipe, and if he can't find an ashtray at hand he throws his matches into the fireplace. Which is all very well in winter when the fire is on. but a great nuisance in the summer.'

'And dangerous,' said Mrs Holbrook, sombrely.

Margaret seized upon this.

'Very dangerous,' she agreed. After a suitable pause she said, 'I've often wondered if that was how Mrs Osgood's fire started. Because it seems to me that she can't have fallen into her gas fire. It wasn't on that day.'

Mrs Holbrook drew a deep breath.

'So you've found out that much,' she said.

She and Margaret exchanged a long wary look.

'I've found out that no gas was used here from a date before Mrs Osgood's death until the date we began to use our gas cooker.'

Mrs Holbrook nodded.

'So naturally I wondered if either of the Osgoods were smokers, and if a lighted match or cigarette end could have started the fire.'

'Miss Osgood doesn't smoke,' said Mrs Holbrook, returning to her polishing. 'And the doctor forbid it to the old lady.'

'Why?'

'Bad for 'er heart, so he said. But she didn't pay no attention to him. She was always a self-willed madam, like the daughter.'

'Did the doctor know she smoked?'

'Oh, yes, he knew. She made no secret of it.'

'That must have been the way the fire started, then. Was that what they thought at the inquest?'

'The inquest!' Mrs Holbrook's voice expressed the greatest contempt. 'There was a rare muddle for you, from start to finish. With the coroner ill, and that young chap trying to get the case over in double quick time. And our Constable Mount not seeing the house till two days after the accident, on account of her lingering on till then. It was only to be expected they'd make a muddle of it. Accidental, they brought it in.'

'But, Mrs Holbrook,' said Margaret, feeling she could not let this go, 'if it was a cigarette end, or a match, that would be accidental, wouldn't it?'

But Mrs Holbrook would not explain herself.

'The old lady knew what started it,' she said. 'But she was too far gone to say clearly. She knew what she'd done, and what she deserved, and what the good God had sent her.'

'No!' Margaret cried. 'She can't have meant it like that! It couldn't happen. She may have been mean and selfish, but God would not literally and physically burn her for it.'

'There's punishments in store for us all,' said Mrs Holbrook with relish, 'and there's times, as of yore, when the good God's patience is exhausted. But perhaps you don't read your Bible, Mrs Seeley?'

'I read the New Testament,' said Margaret, defensively. 'I don't think we are meant to take all the Old Testament in the same way. I don't think God is really the same as the Jehovah of the Jews.'

She broke off, feeling hypocritical, and also too much out of touch to sustain a theological argument.

'The Lord is a jealous God,' said Mrs Holbrook severely, and went away to get another tin of floor polish.

A day or two later, as Margaret was passing Bankside, Miss Osgood, who was near the garden gate of the little house, opened it, and called to her.

'Have you a minute to spare, Mrs Seeley?'

'Not really,' answered Margaret. She hesitated, and was lost.

'I've been hearing from Mr Drummond about our old staircase,' Miss Osgood said. 'The church has acquired it, I am glad to say.'

'Yes,' answered Margaret. 'Tom and I are very glad they were able to give the price our expert said it was worth. Because now it will be used for Shipworth Church. The Bishop came over, you know, and he said a plaque would be put up to the memory of the carpenter who made it; his work has become famous this year, on account of his centenary, though I think he only did a few other carvings for churches. But they are all very beautiful things, I

believe. Didn't your family realise how good the staircase was?'

She felt uneasy directly she had made this tactless remark, but Miss Osgood did not seem to mind.

'No,' she answered. 'It had been in the house long enough for everyone to take it for granted. My mother, not being an Osgood, except by marriage, never took any interest in it at all. It was my dear grandfather who told me the story of it.'

'I wonder why he didn't tell you how important it was,' said Margaret.

'I don't think it was important in those days,' answered Miss Osgood. 'I don't think it became important until the carver's name came up in the preparations for the North-bury pageant, and that was because of the centenary, as you say.'

'It was funny the vicar telling me so much about the legend and nothing about the centenary or the pageant.'

'You mean at the Howards' party? I don't think he knew of the pageant at that time. He wanted the staircase, quite apart from its fame. He had wanted Mother to leave it to the church, but she wouldn't, as you know. Well, in the end the church has got it--at a price. That would amuse Mother, if she knew.'

Margaret found it far from amusing.

'I begged for a little bit as a memento,' went on Miss Osgood. 'That was what I wanted to tell you. Let me show it to you. Down, Spot!'

Margaret followed the short, dowdy figure into the little sitting room of Bankside. On a small table, covered with such oddments as a silver snuff-box, a crystal ball mounted on ebony, and two ivory elephants, she saw the familiar slender post and carved ends of one of the staircase banisters. Was it *the* banister? She would have liked to pick it up and unscrew it, but she dared not do so. As if divining her thought, Miss Osgood picked it up.

'They are hollow,' she said. 'But of course you know that.'

She took it apart to show her visitor.

'That is how it was made, as a plaything for my poor mentally afflicted uncle.'

'Very ingenious,' said Margaret, steadily.

'Such beautiful work,' went on Miss Osgood. 'Look at the detail.'

She picked up a large magnifying glass which lay on an open bureau nearby, and handed it to Margaret.

'This belonged to Mother,' she said. 'Her sight was bad towards the end, but she never would have spectacles. She thought they were unbecoming on a woman.'

Margaret, inwardly bubbling with excitement, took the glass by the wooden handle attached to it, and peered at the carving. After a suitable interval, she gave it back to Miss Osgood and laid down the banister beside the smaller bric-à-brac.

'Marvellously carved,' she said. 'I'm glad they let you have this. I hope you didn't mind . . . I mean, perhaps, if you'd known . . .'

'Don't,' said Miss Osgood. 'I could not in any case have sold Fairlawn for more than the price you gave for it. No one wanted it: you were the first firm offer I got. And I couldn't possibly have taken the staircase out before I sold it, could I? Nor gone to the expense of putting in another one instead. So don't say another word.'

Margaret walked back to the garden gate, with Miss Osgood just behind her, and Spot running round them both. As she turned to go she could not help saying, 'Your cousin has left, I see?'

'Unfortunately, no,' said Miss Osgood. 'Only gone to London again. Quite pointless: I don't believe he has any work in prospect. But he finds London more exciting than Shipworth, no doubt. Even on a Sunday evening.'

'Sunday evening?' echoed Margaret, faintly.

'Last Sunday evening. That's so like him. Walked out of the house just as I had made the tea, and did not arrive back till after ten. Ran up to see some friends, he said, and if I didn't believe him, ask at the station.'

'Did you?' said Margaret, forcing a smile.

'Of course not.'

'I'm sorry. Of course not.'

Miss Osgood watched her visitor go down the road to the corner. When the latter was no longer in sight, she turned and went back into her house.

'That great magnifying glass could easily have started the rug burning,' said Margaret, describing her visit to Bankside. 'Suppose Mrs Osgood was sitting in her chair, reading, and dozed off, with the glass lying on her knees. A ray of sunlight, through that powerful lens, could certainly start a fire.'

'Only it was a dull, cold, cloudy day,' said Tom, with a self-satisfied smile.

'Damn! We don't know if it was cloudy *all* the time.'

'I've had another chat with the Howards about Mrs Osgood's smoking,' said Tom. 'They are positive it was forbidden. They are also positive that there were no cigarette ends or matches lying about on the day of the fire.'

'They would be easy to miss. But I wonder if there was any break in the clouds that afternoon. A July sun wouldn't take long . . .'

'O.K. We'll remember to ask that, too. But there could be a much simpler explanation, though not a very pleasant one.'

'What do you mean?'

'Mrs Holbrook.'

'*Mrs Holbrook?*'

'She was left in charge that afternoon, wasn't she, while Miss Osgood went in to Oldford? In fact, she was often left in charge, to settle the old woman down for her rest, and to get her up again. There would be nothing to stop her preparing a little bonfire if she felt like it.'

'But *how*? Mrs Osgood would discover what she'd done if it meant any interference with her chair, and would tell her daughter as soon as she came in. Besides, it was a long time after Mrs Holbrook left. It couldn't have been

smouldering for more than an hour! Miss Osgood had tea with her mother in the bedroom that afternoon.'

'Mrs Holbrook had it in for the old lady.'

'Yes. And she hated the room and hints darkly about judgements, like Alf. But what does that really amount to? No, Tom. Not our Mrs Holbrook.'

'I don't know. I don't know anything.'

'We do know Christopher Osgood went to London on Sunday evening, and was near this house on Sunday afternoon. I'd be ready to bet anything he took Uncle George's brief-case and has the will. That's where we ought to concentrate, not on poor hard-working Mrs Holbrook.'

XII

DR MATHESON lived on the outskirts of Oldford, about two miles from the centre of the town, and about an equal distance from the village of Shipworth. As the latter place had no resident doctor, and his surgery was on the bus route into the town, his panel practice included a large number of the villagers, and since the start of the National Health Service, an increasing number of the local gentry, or new poor, as well. On the Oldford side a housing estate had grown slowly out from the town until it threatened to engulf his pleasant rambling home. From being a well-to-do country practitioner with a kind heart for the needy, and plenty of fat yearly accounts with prosperous landowners, time to do his work as well as he was able, and time to refresh himself with golf and tennis and a little hunting in season, he found himself turned into a busy sorting-office for the local hospital. He disliked the change, but as he was powerless to fight it, and could, in any case, think of no other possible development in post-war conditions, he did his best to preserve both his interest and his skill on his patients' behalf.

Mrs Osgood had been one of his few remaining private patients, though her daughter had changed to the National Health Service as soon as it was introduced. In Mrs Osgood it was a case of prejudice triumphing over parsimony; in her daughter it was the other way round. This did not trouble Dr Matheson. He had to visit the mother at regular intervals, and if Miss Osgood wanted to consult him, he could always charge the extra hour to her parent, and was spared having to spend time on her as a patient in his surgery. Also Miss Osgood ailed very seldom

He took it as a matter of course that the Seeleys from London produced National Health cards to transfer to his list. But he was surprised and very reluctant when Tom rang him up to ask for an appointment out of hours. He explained the times of his surgery. Tom was apologetic.

'If I didn't think it was important I wouldn't make such a nuisance of myself,' he said. 'I am not ill, nor is any of my family. It is a medical matter; to be strictly accurate, I suppose I ought to call it a forensic medical matter. I can't be more detailed on the telephone. I just don't want to come when it will keep other people waiting.'

Still reluctant and surprised, but now considerably curious, Dr Matheson named a day and time, and on the next Tuesday evening at nine o'clock, opened his door to Tom in person.

'Will my car be in the way there?' Tom asked, looking back at it.

'No,' said Dr Matheson, wonderingly.

'In case you have to dash off,' explained Tom. 'I'm rather blocking your garage.'

'That's all right,' said the doctor, with a sudden grin. 'I'm not the Fire Service. My emergency calls can usually get under way quite quietly, you know. Especially these days, when people tend to cry out well before they are hurt. So as not to miss what the next man managed to get. But come in.'

Tom followed the doctor to the surgery and sat down in the patients' chair.

'I don't want to be a bore,' he said, 'but surely there are some emergencies that you must go to as quickly as possible? I mean accidents, broken limbs, cut arteries, burns and so on?'

'Of course, but they so often happen out of doors, or at work, and go straight to hospital. I was speaking generally. For the commonest story is the urgent call, where I find the patient has already been ill for two or three days, and the nearest relative can't face another disturbed night.'

Accidents in the home are certainly far too frequent, but in a single practice they don't amount to very many.'

'It is about a former accident case of yours that I have come to see you,' said Tom.

Dr Matheson was not at first at all interested, but he listened patiently, and with growing attention. The Seeleys were people he approved of, professionally; they had brought in their cards at once, on arriving in the district, and they had not so far, after nearly a year, required his services. Healthy, reasonable patients. He felt indulgent towards Tom. And his revelations were certainly disturbing.

'I don't want to go to the police,' said Tom. 'Not yet, at any rate. I wouldn't know what to say to them, and I obviously can't bring a definite charge of housebreaking or theft against the unknown person who visited us. The evidence is much too vague, and we did nothing at the time. But there is something going on in Shipworth that needs exposing, in order to stop it. We are newcomers. If we make any sort of open move we shall have the rest of the inhabitants solid against us, and no chance of proving anything. As I've told you, the whole thing pivots on Mrs Osgood's death. Obviously you were satisfied as to the medical side of it. But were you satisfied about the cause of the fire? Was it established at the inquest? Did you agree with the findings?'

Dr Matheson looked at him steadily.

'I had no reason whatever to suspect any sort of foul play,' he said, 'or I should have reported my suspicions to the police at the time.'

'Of course. I don't mean that exactly.'

'What, exactly, do you mean?'

'Well, how did the fire start?'

'I don't remember. I don't think I ever knew exactly.'

'You don't?'

'Look,' said the doctor, 'there was no fire when I got to Fairlawn, only four casualties with different degrees of injury; one dangerously ill, one rather seriously injured

and shocked, and two only slightly. I wanted to send the lot into hospital, even Mrs Osgood. I felt I could keep her going till she got there, and after that she would get the benefit of modern apparatus and nursing. But the old lady was pretty bad, and admittedly it was a big risk to move her. Her daughter made it quite clear that she thought it would be madness to attempt it, and that her mother would be more likely to die of fury at being taken from her home, than of shock and heart failure being treated in it. So I gave way and looked after both of them at Fairlawn. I was lucky enough to get a trained nurse for night duty, and Miss Osgood is a plucky woman. She ought to have been in bed herself, and ought not to have used her hands at all for a week or more. But she did, in spite of the bandages and the pain. I give her full marks for guts.'

'But the inquest,' said Tom, trying to get back to his main preoccupation. 'Can you remember what cause they found at the inquest? Cause of the fire, I mean.'

'Sorry. I'm afraid I can't help you. I gave my evidence early in the proceedings and was then allowed to leave. I had a long visiting list that day, in spite of its being the so-called slack season.'

'Then you don't even know who else was called to give evidence?'

'Sorry. At least,—I didn't know at the time, and I don't remember now, but I kept the full account of the inquest in the *Oldford Gazette*. Would you like to borrow that? I'm perfectly willing to lend it to you.'

Tom smiled thankfully.

'I should be more than grateful,' he said. 'And there is only one more thing I want to ask. You did forbid smoking, didn't you?'

'The old lady again?'

'Yes.'

'I'm not sure I ought to answer that. Yes, I tried to. Hopeless, of course. She was the most pig-headed patient I

ever had. Oh, Miss Osgood would never actually buy cigarettes for her mother. But nothing worked. The old lady got the gardener to bring them in, or simply scrounged them off her visitors.'

'So the fire could have been started by a cigarette end, as I said at the beginning. Did you by any chance happen to notice any signs of her smoking that afternoon? Ashtrays, ash on the floor, cigarette ends on the floor, matches, a lighter . . .'

'Stop,' said Dr Matheson. 'Now I come to think of it there were a few ends on the floor. After I'd settled everyone down, Miss Osgood in her own room with the daily to sit by her,—the nurse was on the way, but hadn't arrived—I went back to the old lady to watch her until I could hand over. I saw these cigarette ends here and there, and thought they must have been scattered in the general confusion. So I picked them up and put them on the mantelpiece for the daily to dispose of.'

'Were they Mrs Osgood's usual brand?'

'De Reske Minors? No. But she smoked anything. They were Craven A. And I thought at the time, "Drummond again." The vicar, you know. He told me once he'd been forced to take an empty case with him when he went to see Mrs Osgood, otherwise she'd have the lot off him before he could get out of the house.'

'But he didn't have an empty case that afternoon. Was he at Fairlawn then?'

'Oh, yes, he was there. Not long before the fire started. I believe. He gave evidence to that effect at the inquest. Actually, he was the last person to see Mrs Osgood alive and well.'

The *Oldford Gazette* had given two full pages to a verbatim report on the inquest on Mrs Osgood. As Tom Seeley followed the somewhat rambling evidence of those present at the accident, he was struck by the contrast between their vague rememberings and the clear, concise reports of both Dr Matheson and Mr Drummond.

'You'd expect the doctor's evidence to be straightforward and scientific,' said Margaret, who had also read the account. 'But the vicar's seems to me rather inhuman, for a clergyman.'

'Almost *prepared*, isn't it?' said Tom.

'You still have a down on him, haven't you?'

'No. Merely an open mind. He appears to have a talent for casting suspicion on himself. Perhaps it has no foundation, but it is, at least, unfortunate.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, why couldn't he mention, at almost any of our conversations about the fire, that he visited Mrs Osgood that afternoon, when her daughter was in the garden and Mrs Holbrook had just left at the end of her day's work?'

'He could have, I suppose. But why should he?'

'I see that he does mention, in his evidence, that the gas fire was not on when he was in the room. That shows the coroner was wondering what started the fire. And neither Miss Osgood nor the Howards remembered *that*, when we asked them who turned it off.'

'Or chose to suppress it. Both Miss Osgood and the Howards have shown all along that they don't want to know how the fire started. Perhaps one of them knows only too well.'

'But with the vicar the last person in Mrs Osgood's room, why not build on that? Especially as Mrs Osgood refused to see him later.'

'Perhaps they wanted to draw as little attention to him as possible, just *because* he was the last person to see her before the accident, and *because* she refused to see him later.'

'That would imply that the two things were connected.'

'Exactly. And none of them wants to involve the vicar in such a frightful suggestion.'

'He wouldn't be,' said Tom. 'Or not necessarily. Suppose their conversation was not very amicable. Mr Drummond says it was, but we only have his word for it.'

Suppose they both got het up over something. We know how difficult the old lady was. She would be quite capable of letting off at him and at the same time borrowing his cigarettes. We know there were traces of his brand of smokes in the room. Dr Matheson told me so. The vicar is outraged, but gives in with a Christian spirit. At the same time he is upset. He gives her more than one cigarette as a peace offering, and smokes a couple himself. Perhaps he lights one for her just as he is leaving. In his agitation at her rudeness to him he drops a smouldering match on her rug. He goes away, not noticing what he has done. She is also too preoccupied with her recent quarrel to notice, until the fire blazes up. Perhaps she did not see, even then, what had caused the fire.'

'Very plausible,' said Margaret. 'But sheer imagining. I think you ought to go and talk to Mr Drummond. You've got too much against him. It isn't right to harbour evil thoughts of another, especially a clergyman, without having it out with him. You ought to tell him straight out about our finding the will with his signature on it, and about our midnight intruder who unscrewed the banister of the famous staircase. And then ask him what about it?'

'To which he would answer, "What about what?" And then I look silly.'

'No, you wouldn't. You'd be far too interested in his reaction.'

'If any.'

There was a silence. Margaret did not want to push her views any further, and Tom, who knew that he secretly agreed with her, wanted to achieve a decent interval before giving way.

'Did Mrs Holbrook say in her evidence that the vicar had called that afternoon?' Margaret asked, presently.

'He called after she'd gone home,' answered Tom. 'At least, after she'd left this place. He said at the inquest that he met M.s Holbrook at the gate and she told him Mrs Osgood was in her room and Miss Osgood was out. He

was accustomed to walk straight in after touching the bell, he says here.'

Tom handed over the *Oldford Gazette* for Margaret to see for herself.

'Miss Osgood was in the garden,' said Margaret. 'He is supposed to be repeating what Mrs Holbrook said to him. I don't see her answer to the same questions.'

'I wonder what she really did say to him?'

Next day Margaret determined to find this out. She no longer bothered to hide her interest in the cause of the fire at Fairlawn, and Mrs Holbrook showed herself perfectly ready to co-operate, while still apparently satisfied in her own mind of a supernatural element in the disaster.

'We were reading the account of the inquest in the *Oldford Gazette* last night,' Margaret began. 'We saw that Mr Drummond was really the last person to see Mrs Osgood before the accident. I don't think anyone has mentioned that to us.'

'It was 'ushed up,' said Mrs Holbrook, as if this were quite a normal proceeding.

'But why?'

'You may well ask. On account of it being known there'd been words between them, I reckon.'

'Was it known? And was it true? Do you mean about the staircase being given to the church?'

'No, I don't mean about the staircase. There wasn't nothing in that.'

'Then what do you mean?'

Mrs Holbrook, who was ironing at the kitchen table, put down the electric iron and re-arranged a garment before answering.

'I don't know that I ought to answer that,' she said. 'Being a witness.'

'Witness of the quarrel? Or witness at the inquest?' asked Margaret, very well knowing that neither of these suggestions was correct.

'Never you mind,' said Mrs Holbrook, calmly. 'What

it was took place before that day. Not but what he wanted to see her alone.'

'Mr Drummond wanted to see Mrs Osgood alone?'

'That's right.'

'How do you know?'

'I met 'im just outside the gate, coming this way.'

'He said that in his evidence. He said you told him Mrs Osgood was in her room, and Miss Osgood was out.'

'I told him Mrs Osgood was in her room.'

'And Miss Osgood? Did you say where she was?'

'I did not. He said it himself.'

'How do you mean?'

'He said, "Miss Osgood has gone into Oldford to-day, as usual, hasn't she?" And I said, "Yes, sir, she did." He didn't ask if she was back, and I didn't say no more.'

'So he could have thought she was still away?'

'He knew she usually got back before I left.'

'I see. So, finding she wasn't in the house, he may have concluded she was not at home?'

Mrs Holbrook spread out one of Tom's handkerchiefs on the ironing cloth.

'If you're thinking because Mr Drummond brought her the cigarettes she was always craving,—Miss Osgood too hard-hearted to get her a few now and then.—you think on account of that he 'ad a hand in setting off that rug. If so, you're very much mistaken, Mrs Seeley. He may be more of a scholar than we've been used to in Shipworth, but he's very well thought of, and no fool, neether.'

'So you know Mr Drummond gave her some cigarettes?' said Margaret. 'Did you know she smoked at least two that afternoon?'

'I does the rooms, don't I?' said Mrs Holbrook.

'You said nothing about cigarettes or cigarette ends at the inquest. Nor did Mr Drummond.'

'The inquest!' said Mrs Holbrook. 'With that young feller in charge? We wasn't asked,' she said, conclusively.

XIII

THE Seeleys made their final move into the new flat just four days before the boys were due to come home for the summer holidays. The room in the staircase wall was now built and plastered, but empty at present, waiting to be decorated when the plaster was dry. The boys' possessions had been distributed between the new bedrooms they would occupy. Margaret hoped that her choice would satisfy them, but was prepared to make changes if they were able to agree upon what they wanted.

The hall of the flat, without the staircase, was rather darker than it had been, but the upper half of the garden door, now of glass, helped to light it. The inner front door was also half of glass; and, as Tom explained, the outer doors need not be shut during the day, unless everyone was out.

The day after the final move, while Margaret and Mrs Holbrook were going over the rooms in the old part of the house, Alf and Fred brought bricks and mortar into the kitchen passage. Coming down the back stairs with a collection of rubbish the two women were stopped by the builders.

'The final touch,' said Margaret gaily. 'Going to brick us up at last?'

'That's right.'

'We'll go round, then. We have to visit the dust bins with this lot.'

By the end of the afternoon the wall was breast high between the new ground-floor flat and the other part of the house. When Tom came home his attention was caught by the load of bricks tipped out near the back door end of the drive. He went to look at it, and having done

so, walked in by the back door. His shout of frustration brought Margaret, laughing, from the kitchen of the flat.

They kissed over the top of the wall.

'You'll have to go round, Pyramus.'

'Damn you, Thisbe, I see I will.'

He returned the way he had come, locking the back door after him, and taking the key.

'I shall have to go the rounds at night from now on,' he said. 'It's getting very complicated.'

'It will be worse next week,' Margaret answered. 'At present no one uses the outside staircase and front door of the upstairs flat. The men go up the back stairs to get there. But when Alf has finished our wall he will be making one upstairs directly over it, and then Flat Two will be separate, as well. The painters and Jack will have to use its proper entrance. I think I ought to get a belt with a chain, and dangle all the keys from it like a medieval chatelaine.'

'It wouldn't be a bad idea to have a key ring for the bunch of them.'

'Then I shouldn't know them apart.'

'Do you need to?'

'Of course. I'll have to let the men in to the top flat and the semi-detached, or are you going to gallop round in your pyjamas before you shave? It won't be so simple as it has been up to now, just putting the catch up on the front door.'

'If I have to let them in anywhere I may as well open up the lot.'

'I know. If you really want to do it yourself,—I'm nearly always dressed by the time the men come, but still . . . you can go round and open the back door, and leave the other keys in the Retiring Room. They've moved again, you know. They are in the front room of the semi-detached.'

'You mean what used to be the servants' hall in Mrs Osgood's young days?'

'Yes. That rather nice room looking out on the drive.'

'If I do leave them the other keys, mind you collect them when they go. The back door was unlocked to-night, you know. I don't think that was a very good idea.'

'Considering there's nothing whatever of ours left over there, I don't see that it matters. And I heard you come in.'

'Only because I called you.'

'I heard you before that. I couldn't leave the kitchen sooner because I had the oven open.'

'If you want to leave the keys for the men they will have to stay separate. I'd better label them. It will be a help to Alf; and later on, too, when we have to show people round.'

Margaret found some pink cardboard luggage labels and cut them down to about an inch square. The collection of keys, neatly named in ink, Tom then put on the sitting room mantelpiece.

'They can stay there for the moment,' he said, graciously. 'I'll put them with my own bunch on the dressing table to-night. Remind me.'

The rest of the dividing wall went up during the next two days. Margaret had her new flat to herself at last. Not that it was completely finished. The wall that Alf had just built would have to be plastered and would need to dry out before it could be distempered. This would be done even later than the staircase room. The Sceleys decided to leave the whole decoration of the hall of their flat until after the end of the school holidays.

These were now upon them. The boys came home riotously excited over the transformation that had taken place. They tramped from room to room during the first day, inspecting, criticising, asking questions. There were several arguments about the relative merits of their new bedrooms, but, to Margaret's relief, her choice was not questioned, and each settled down peaceably to arrange his possessions in his new quarters.

Meanwhile the builders' work went forward. The

painters were going steadily through the rooms in the top flat. Jack Holbrook was up there too, repeating his design of pipes in the kitchen and bathroom, and Alf was proceeding with the final division of Fairlawn.

'I'd like you to have a look in next door, mam,' he said to Margaret, coming into the hall of her flat one morning. 'About them attics.'

Margaret went round. Already the former back door had been transformed. A porch was being built in front of it, and the scullery, into which it had led, was now converted into a hall, leading direct into the former kitchen passage. The kitchen, a large and airy room, retained its former door, and stripped of cupboards and old-fashioned range, was turned into an attractive sitting or dining room. The former larder, off the scullery, was to be made into a cloakroom.

'Jack's next job, isn't it?' said Margaret, looking in at the stripped space. 'Where do they have their kitchen?'

'In what was the pantry,' said Alf. 'Would you care to see the plan?'

'No, it doesn't matter. We've got a copy. I'll look at it later. I think Mr Green has been most ingenious over this part. We rather left it to him. We ran out of ideas when we'd got the scheme for the two flats.'

'It was upstairs I wanted you to see,' said Alf.

On the landing Margaret found a pile of bricks, the usual board, with its slab of mortar in the middle, and various ladders. Also a contraption in metal, like a tripod with a fourth arm bearing a pulley.

Alf pointed upwards to the ceiling, where the cover leading to the loft under the roof had been removed.

'It's like this, mam,' he explained. 'That attic, or loft, runs the whole length of the house. I take it you'll want the separation carried right through up to the roof?'

'Oh, yes,' said Margaret. 'It would never do to have an open connection. The boys have already explored the new way up into the loft in the top flat.'

'Yes,' said Alf. 'I noticed they had.'

Margaret instantly saw the real reason for her presence there.

'Have they been coming through?' she asked. 'I hope they haven't been a nuisance?'

'They come through,' said Alf, not committing himself further.

'I'll tell them they must keep out of the top flat. They'll be in the painters' way in any case and get covered with paint and distemper. It's the beginning of the holidays,' she added, apologetically. 'They always come back so full of energy.'

'High-spirited,' agreed Alf.

'They are going away for three weeks from next Monday, to my sister. I didn't want to have them here all the time, with the work at this stage. But we can't very well go with them, this year.'

Alf looked at her approvingly.

'Would you care to go up, mam?' he asked. 'I'd like you to see where the wall has to go in.'

He set the ladder in place, and Margaret mounted. The attic or loft, as Alf had said, ran right through the top of the front part of the house. Behind, the roof sloped to a lower level.

'I'll bring it up from the room below,' said Alf, 'and from the new dividing wall across the passage. You won't need a new access here, on account of having the old one. It's lucky it was made over the landing, or we'd have to put another new one in.'

'Won't it be rather a business building up here?' asked Margaret, peering through the darkness to where Alf stood demonstrating the position of the dividing wall.

'Mr Green has asked the electrician to come up and fix me a temporary light,' said Alf.

Margaret climbed down the ladder, with Alf following.

'What's this for?' she asked, when she was back on the landing.

'The derrick? Hoisting up the bricks and that. Fred's job, lifting them.'

'I see.'

Before leaving the top floor of the semi-detached, Margaret looked into the rooms in turn.

'Four nice bedrooms they'll have, won't they? And the old bathroom is quite palatial. So is the airing cupboard. The Osgoods must have lived in some style at one time.'

'Those days won't come back no more,' said Alf, with quiet satisfaction.

Though in conversation with his wife Tom Seeley had persistently teased her by expressing suspicion of the vicar, he did not in his heart accuse Mr Drummond of any form of aggression, whether in the guise of house-breaking, larceny, or murder. But he did want to get to the bottom of the one well-established mystery in the case. What was the meaning of the will, signed by Mrs Osgood, and witnessed by Mr Drummond and Mrs Holbrook? Why had it turned up in the cellar of Fairlawn, and why, and by whom, had it been purloined from Uncle George's briefcase? To what sinister use had it been put since then? Where was it now?

Following the vicar's former conduct, Tom rang him up to ask for an interview, and the next evening found himself being led by a subdued, wary-looking Mrs Drummond to her husband's study.

Tom went straight to the point. He told the vicar about finding the will in the cellar and about its subsequent disappearance. He described the former midnight visit and the results of their investigation of the staircase. He did not attempt to relate these events to Mrs Osgood's death. When he had finished, he sat back, looking at his host, waiting for his discourse to sink in.

Mr Drummond offered a box of cigarettes.

'Mind if I smoke my pipe?'

'Of course not.'

The vicar went to the window, looked out at the blue dusk, returned to his desk to switch on a reading lamp,

went to the window again to draw the curtains. All his movements were jerky, and nervous, and undecided. Tom watched him, with pity, but a certain intolerance.

'This has gone far enough,' said Mr Drummond, at last, sitting down in his former chair. 'I blame myself in the matter: I blame myself very much indeed. I should have acted before. But I had hoped——'

He broke off, not saying what it was he had hoped. Tom waited, patiently drawing on his pipe.

'You read the document, I take it?' asked Mr Drummond.

'We read it. My wife's uncle was worried by the implications. We did not know just what we ought to do with it. So Uncle George decided to take it to his solicitors, explain the circumstances, and let them break it to Miss Osgood—or to her solicitors; same thing, but more formal.'

'You did not think of sending it straight to Miss Osgood, or even to me?'

'In the circumstances, no.'

The vicar stared at his desk.

'In the circumstances you have described to me?'

'Exactly.'

After another pause Mr Drummond lifted his head.

'Mrs Osgood read over that new will to me before she signed it,' he said. 'And before Mrs Holbrook was called in to witness her signature with me. She said Fairlawn came first with her: she said the place was sacred; a sacred charge from her husband and his father and his father before him. I said the Osgoods would not have given it such prominence. I reminded her of the comparative unimportance of worldly possessions. She disregarded me completely. She had chosen her path and meant to follow it. She had warned her daughter of her intention, and of what she could expect if she left Fairlawn, and she deliberately chose one of the afternoons when Laura was in Oldford to ask me to see her. I was put in a most difficult position.'

'I see that,' said Tom. 'You daren't risk upsetting her, with that heart.'

'Exactly. And I could advise, but it was not my business to *prevent* her disposing of her property. Everything was left to Laura unconditionally, in her original will. In this second one were the conditions you read. Laura could have the money, but not the property.'

'Enough to live on. I take it, but not enough to buy a house out of capital, and still have a comfortable income.'

'Just so. Well then, Mrs Holbrook was called, and she and I witnessed Mrs Osgood's signature. I said good-bye to her, and she then asked me if I would post the will, with the covering letter she had already written, to her solicitor. She had the envelope all ready, too, and stamped. I am ashamed to say I indulged my pride and refused to do so. I told her she must find someone else to post it. I have regretted my behaviour ever since.'

Tom smiled, but as he saw how events had moved from that small childish display of temper in a dedicated man, the smile faded from his face.

'It was never posted?'

'No. She had it in her room when I left. She meant to ask the gardener to take it the next day. I suppose she did not trust Mrs Holbrook sufficiently, and it was out of the question to ask her daughter, according to her. Laura came to me in great distress the next day. Her mother had accused her of taking some document. She knew what was in it, because her mother had threatened her with it, as I told you, but she said she had not even seen it in her mother's room, far less taken it. I am afraid I did not altogether believe her. I thought it was possible she had really taken it and destroyed it.'

'If she had taken it, she would have destroyed it.'

'Quite. I know now that I did her an injustice. I seem to have gone wrong at every step,' said Mr Drummond, desperately.

'Are you sure Mrs Holbrook did not take it?' asked Tom. 'She felt she had a grievance against the Osgoods.'

'There was no reason why she should want to take it. She did not know what was in it. I doubt if she would have grasped its meaning, in any case. Besides, she must have thought I had posted it. Before she left the room Mrs Osgood said to me, "You will post this for me, won't you, vicar?" I waited till we were by ourselves before refusing to do so.'

'I see. That ought to let out Mrs Holbrook.'

He waited a few seconds, then said suddenly, 'Who did take it, Drummond?'

'Christopher. At least—I can't be sure . . .'

'You are sure. You may just possibly not be right, but you are sure in your own mind. So are we. He was in Shipworth that day, wasn't he? He saw Mrs Osgood, to ask for help over his court case? You know he was in Shipworth?'

'Yes. I passed him in the village. He must have been there, at Fairlawn, before Laura got back, and well before Mrs Holbrook left the house. But I have no proof he took it.'

'Did you tell Miss Osgood this?'

'Yes.'

'Did not Mrs Osgood suspect him?'

'She may have. She chose to accuse her daughter.'

'By which time Christopher had left Shipworth?'

'He had been taken into custody.'

'I see.'

They stared at one another.

'So that was why he hid it in the staircase. Because he could not take it with him. He knew he was going to be arrested. Neither you nor Miss Osgood thought of that?'

'I did not.'

'Nor did she, or she would have searched the house for it. Now we come to this year. We had our nocturnal visit about the time Christopher left gaol. And we know he went to London the evening Uncle George and the brief-case were on the train. Fair enough, don't you think?'

'I agree.' Mr Drummond hesitated, then made up his mind and went on. 'There is one thing more you ought to know. I was with Mrs Osgood on the day of her accident. Within an hour of it, to be exact.'

'I know you were.'

'You know?'

'I have read the account of the inquest,' said Tom, truthfully. He did not feel called upon to add to this.

'Yes. I suppose you would do that. But you do not know, nor did I think it necessary to say in my evidence, that at that interview she presented me with a further copy of the same will and asked me to witness her signature as before.'

'One minute,' said Tom. 'These copies, as you call them. Were they prepared by her lawyer? I should have thought he would try to change her mind. It seems strange that her solicitor should not have had any say in the matter.'

'No. Mrs Osgood had not consulted her solicitor. She told me explicitly that she did not propose to consult him. She did not require advice in doing her duty, she said, and she did not want to pay for advice she would not take. She intended merely to send her lawyer a signed will with orders to act upon it, in the event of her death. It began with the usual preamble in such cases about revoking all other wills, etc.'

'I see. Would it have been valid?'

'I don't know. The point, as I see it, is that both she and her daughter believed it would. Well, to get back to what I was saying. When she handed me the second copy I told her, as politely as I could, that I declined to act again. I told her she must find other witnesses. I disapproved too strongly of her action. I told her that I suspected Christopher of taking the first copy. She said that made it all the more necessary to get the second one in order. I stuck to my decision and left her.'

'With the second copy in her hand?'

'Yes.'

‘And she could not have found other witnesses before the accident?’

‘No.’

‘But it was not found later?’

‘No. It was not found.’

Tom thought furiously, then he said, in an altered voice, ‘Do you think it possible, as a result of your stand against it, that she wanted to destroy it herself, and tried to burn it, and so set herself alight?’

‘No,’ said Mr Drummond, steadily. ‘No. I should like to think she changed her mind, even if it led to those fatal consequences. But I’m sure she didn’t. It would be too utterly out of character.’

XIV

‘**T**HEN what happened to the second copy?’ asked Margaret, lying flat on her back, and staring at the ceiling above her bed. Tom, in a similar position beside her, grunted, ‘Two guesses.’

‘Miss Osgood, this time.’

‘Possible. Not probable. Too badly injured at the start.’

‘Mrs Holbrook?’

‘More possible. But she would have realised it was a document of importance, and remembered the other, perhaps. Anyway, she would have mentioned it. She was asked if she had noticed anything in the room after the fire. She said no.’

‘She was being asked that in relation to how the fire started. But go on. I’ve had my two guesses, and you think you know a better bet. Let’s have it.’

‘Buffy.’

‘Oh Lord, yes. She was first on the scene, wasn’t she?’

‘I don’t suggest she left the old lady burning while she ran rapidly through the contents trying to discover if it was anything she could cash in on. I think it is probable that she noticed it as she ran in—after all, it is a fair size, even folded—obviously not a writing block—and kicked it out of the way as inflammable material, while she seized Mrs Osgood by the shoulders to pull her out of her chair. Then Miss Osgood arrived, in a matter of seconds, and laid hands on the burning rug, and Bill helped Buffy with Mrs Osgood. When they had the fire out I think Buffy may have noticed the thing again, and picked it up. Perhaps she saw then that it might be important, but there was still work to do helping to put Mrs Osgood on the bed and

loosen her underclothes and get a hot water bottle and so on. I shouldn't wonder if she stuffed the thing in the pocket of her slacks. She was wearing slacks, wasn't she?'

'I don't think we know. But I expect she was. She was in the garden with Bill when it happened.'

'She and Bill were taken off to hospital and they were both kept in that night. She would have time to read it.'

'She would not. She would be flat out, with sedatives, or morphia, or whatever they give them. Next day, perhaps. But it hadn't been signed. It was no earthly good as a will.'

'It was a statement of Mrs Osgood's intention. If our vague suspicions are correct, and Mrs Osgood was murdered, that document provided proof of a possible motive.'

'Only if Miss Osgood did the murder.'

'Who else, in the present state of our knowledge, could possibly have done it?'

'But how? *How?* She had been in the garden an hour or more. You aren't suggesting Miss Osgood set up some sort of time-fuse laid on to her mother's chair, with her mother sitting in it, watching her?'

'I am not. I haven't the slightest idea how it could have been done. But I think Buffy had that copy of the will, probably still has it. I think she paid her debts with it.'

'Blackmail! Buffy? Oh, I do hope not. Poor Bill!'

'Poor Bill had our cellar moss on him. The snooping and the intrigue have not been confined to Buffy.'

'But I *like* them. At least I like him, and I did like her at first.'

'So did I. I do still. I am more unprincipled than you. If Miss Osgood really set fire to her mamma I feel I should like her to be blackmailed.'

'I think it's time we went to sleep.'

'All right.'

Tom turned on his side away from her. She shut her eyes, but visions of Buffy in exquisite clothes paraded before her closed lids.

'Tom! Tom, are you asleep?'

'Yes.'

'If you were sure, would you ask Buffy for it back?'

'Ask for what back?'

'The will.'

'Not on your life. And I'm not sure.'

'You were just now.'

'Before I went to sleep. Now I'm not.'

'You are ridiculous, darling.'

He turned to grab her.

'Am I, darling?'

'Oh, Tom, you said you were asleep.'

With the boys away at their aunt's cottage by the sea Margaret felt unnaturally quiet for the time of year. She was even bored. This was her second summer without a change of scene. The conversion was mopping up money at a most alarming rate, and she could not see any immediate end to it. But the top flat was nearly finished, and the dividing walls, loft and all, would be done by the end of the week, Alf had told her. She took a bus into Oldford and put all the particulars of the flat and semi-detached house into the hands of three of the best agents in the town.

They promised to do their best for her. The flat would present no difficulty, they thought, and since the housing shortage was still acute, and licences to build privately were almost as rare as plots of land upon which to do it, they had guarded hopes for the semi-detached, though people, they said, were not very keen on this type of property. They wanted to know when clients could be shown over.

Margaret rashly said, at any time, by appointment, but preferably not at week-ends. The agents pointed out that week-ends were the only time most husbands could find for house-hunting. Margaret gave way about week-ends, but insisted upon appointments being made for all viewers. On her way back in the bus she felt that the property was practically disposed of already.

All Mr Green's men were now concentrated upon the

semi-detached, which Tom insisted should have a name of its own.

'And the sooner it has a drive of its own, and a gate of its own on to the road, the better,' he said. 'When, if ever, are we going to get Mrs Holbrook's able-bodied relative to give us a day's gardening a week?'

'I asked her again, yesterday. After all, it's only August, and she said the autumn. But she was quite definite he could come at the end of the month.'

'I've a good mind to cut a path through the shrubbery now. A straight path leading up to the front door of Fairholme.'

'Of where?'

'Fairholme. Don't you think we might call it that?'

'No!'

'Why not?'

'Why not Fairleigh, or Fairview, or Faircote?'

'If you'd rather.'

'I wouldn't. I don't see why it has to be fair at all. What can we call it that isn't too hopelessly commonplace?'

'It's a fair stumper.'

'I don't think that would do.'

'What?'

'Fairstumper.'

'Silly clot! As a matter of fact the future owners are sure to find their own name.'

'True. We'll call it Fairholme provisionally, if you like.'

So Margaret rang up the agents and told them the semi-detached house was called Fairholme. And she and Tom spent a very energetic Tuesday evening with the axe, the kitchen chopper, the shears, and the secateurs, clearing a track to the hedge and marking a place on it where the future gate would stand. Presently the agents' boards would cluster round this spot, the Seeleys promised one another, and someone of substantial means, available, not tied up in other property, would look through the clearing at the attractive little porch of Fairholme, and in active

competition with the many other applicants, would pay down the highest price they were allowed, by the terms of their licence, to demand.

In the meantime their own part of the house became very peaceful. There were no longer any noises overhead. Margaret and Mrs Holbrook went up once to see whether the floors needed scrubbing, but they found that the painters had left everything very clean. Only in one room was there any mess, and that was in the fireplace.

'It's from the chimney that goes up through the loft,' said Margaret. 'I expect this is from the disturbance Alf is making, building the wall up to the roof.'

'In my opinion,' said Mrs Holbrook, 'it's them jackdaws come back. I seen them on the roof only the other afternoon. They can't get down their old place, so they're trying the next chimney.'

'But we had cages put on all the chimneys.'

'I don't say they'll succeed,' said Mrs Holbrook. 'But it was only to be expected they'd try.'

This opinion was confirmed by Jack Holbrook the next day. Margaret met him in the drive with his tools collected round him, waiting for the builder's van to arrive to take them away.

'I'm through here,' he said, in answer to her greeting. 'They've got a job for me over at the cottage hospital, now.'

'Thank you for all you've done,' said Margaret. 'We seem to be getting towards the end of the work now.'

'I don't know so much,' said Jack. 'Alf reckons to finish upstairs about the end of the week, but there's plenty left for him on the ground floor, fireplaces, and that door into the garden.'

'I suppose so,' said Margaret. 'We hope to let the top flat quite soon. I want to get people into it. It's bad for houses to stand empty, and your mother thinks the jackdaws are attacking one of the chimneys up there.'

'So she told me,' Jack answered. 'I see them myself, sitting up there, considering.'

They laughed, but Margaret went back into the house feeling rather unhappy. More jackdaw trouble was the last thing she wanted.

By Thursday evening of that week Margaret had shown two quite unsuitable couples over the top flat, while one stout complaining woman with a sheaf of orders to view had taken a single glance at Fairholme's new front porch and announced that it was not at all what she had been led to expect. To this Margaret made no answer. She was anxious only for the stout one to go away.

But it was a little depressing, and something in her general demeanour led Buffy Howard to exclaim, the next time she saw her, 'You look as if you were sickening for something. You ought to get Tom to dash over to Paris or somewhere with you for the week-end.'

'As if we could! I'm all right, only the wretched house is beginning to get on top of me. I thought we should at least let the flat at once.'

'How long has it been on the market?'

'Since Monday.'

Buffy laughed very heartily.

'You haven't even begun. You'll get people along soon. There's a housing shortage.'

'So I was led to believe. Or is that only if you want a house, not the other way round.'

'Agents are always depressing.'

'I've had two lots already. But absolutely no good. And a stinker who ran from the sight of Fairholme's front door.'

Buffy laughed again.

'Come to think of it,' she said, 'I haven't seen over that part at all. Would you be too fed up, or too busy, if we came in one evening?'

'Of course not.'

'So that we can recommend it to people,' said Buffy, warmly. 'And I mean that, I'm not just being polite. And do cheer up. I'm sure both it and the flat will go like hot cakes in a week or two.'

'Thanks awfully. I'm not really uncheerful,' said Margaret. 'In fact, I'm rather thrilled this week, because Tom and I have a party in London on Saturday, and we're staying up the night. Thing I haven't done for months.'

'That's wonderful,' said Buffy, heartily. 'I couldn't be more pleased for you.'

There was a good deal of hilarity that evening when Tom and Margaret took the Howards over Fairholme. Tom and Bill climbed into the loft and explored it to the darkest depths through the small gap still waiting to be bricked in. After that they went down the stairs on the outside of the banisters, and behaved generally in a very boyish manner.

'Showing off,' said Buffy. 'Take no notice.'

She and Margaret stood in one of the back rooms, looking down into the garden.

'How much will you have to give them?' Buffy asked.

'A piece straight through to the end, in line with their part of the house.'

'They get rather a wild bit, don't they?' said Buffy, looking at the shrubs and winding paths near the house, beyond the paved yard with its outbuildings.

'Not altogether. If they take the bushes away, the general lay-out is rather attractive. I should grass some of it in and have the rest as rose-beds. Beyond, they get quite a slice of the orchard. It could be made into a kitchen garden as well.'

'And the compost heap,' said Buffy. 'They get that, and the general rubbish heap next door to it.'

'Compost is very valuable,' said Margaret. 'We shall get some. Anyhow the fence will clear up the dividing line, and what goes with it.'

They turned away, and walked downstairs. The men had finished their tour and were leaning against the wall in the yard near to where the new garden door was marked out to pass beside, but not into it.

'They won't have a back door in the ordinary sense,'

explained Margaret to Buffy. 'You get into the yard through the new kitchen and out of it by a new path that will lead round into their drive. We thought of making the garden exit through the old kitchen, which is now a reception room, in the form of a french window, but it would have messed up the cellar window, Alf said.'

'How do you mean?'

'I'm not quite sure. Do you know, Tom?'

'Something about light and air and opening and shutting,' said Tom, vaguely.

'Don't you always keep it shut?' asked Bill.

His voice was politely interested, he looked at Tom with unembarrassed innocent eyes.

'As much as possible.' Tom answered.

Miss Osgood, too, was interested in Fairholme. She rang up Margaret on Friday evening to ask if she might look over the property on Saturday morning on behalf of some friends of hers.

'Well, not the morning,' said Margaret. 'Our builders leave at twelve on Saturdays just now. They are doing the half-day overtime to get the job through by the end of September. It would be all right in the afternoon, though.'

Miss Osgood was delighted.

'But that would be much better,' her voice came over, positively cooing. 'Ever so much better. I didn't like to suggest it, because I know you have an important occasion in town in the evening.'

'We shan't be going till quite late,' said Margaret. 'It doesn't begin till nine.'

'Then if you would be so good . . .'

'Of course.'

Miss Osgood called, considerably, at three o'clock. She really wanted to look over Fairholme, she said, but it would be a great pleasure if she might be allowed to take a peep at Flat Two. Margaret indulged her, and they tramped up the newly painted outside iron staircase to the front door of

the top flat. Inside, everything still looked beautifully clean; quite ready for a tenant. Margaret stooped to listen near two of the fireplaces.

'Why do you do that?' Miss Osgood asked.

'Jackdaws.'

Margaret told her about Mrs Holbrook's forebodings, and Miss Osgood laughed heartily.

'Do you hear anything?' she asked. 'What does it sound like?'

'Don't you know? I mean, from when you had them here. I don't really know, myself. Scrapings and tweetings, the Howards say. It would be maddening to have them building in these chimneys before the rooms are occupied. Our sitting room fire when we start it in the autumn will cope with one chimney, but we only have electric and gas fires in the other rooms.'

They left Flat Two and made their way into Fairholme. Again Miss Osgood admired, and exclaimed, and said she could not recognise the kitchens of her old home in this charming little house.

'I almost wish I had done the conversion myself,' she said. 'And moved into this part. It has lost its old gloomy character completely. I do congratulate you.'

She was equally pleased with the upper floor, and interested to hear from Margaret that the final separation was now complete.

'They finished the wall in the loft yesterday,' said Margaret. 'I don't know if there is any more to be done up there. Do you want to go up?'

'Is the ladder safe?' asked Miss Osgood, foolishly.

'They seem to find it so,' answered Margaret. 'Mind your head at the top.'

Miss Osgood did not actually climb into the loft. She went up about six rungs of the ladder, and poked her head through the loft opening. Margaret stood below, one foot on the lowest rung, to steady it. She wondered why Alf had left the ladder in place, but concluded that he must have a few finishing touches to add. The derrick was still

in the loft, though the rope and tackle were coiled neatly in a corner of the landing.

‘Very interesting,’ said Miss Osgood, descending.

A little wind, blowing through the open front door below, funnelled up the staircase and swirled about them, stirring the dust so that they coughed and sneezed.

‘They make such a *mess*,’ gasped Margaret. She moved into the nearest room and pulled down the window at the top. ‘It never occurs to them to have a little air in the place, either.’

‘It wouldn’t,’ said Miss Osgood.

They looked at the other bedrooms, freshly distempered and painted, and at the bathroom, stripped ready in its turn.

‘I really do think we shall have finished by the end of next month at the latest,’ Margaret said, as they began to go down the stairs. ‘Did you notice where the new drive will lead out? Mr Green is getting up a new team quite soon to clear it out and gravel it. Then there will only be the fences back and front, and the thing will be done.’

‘Wonderful,’ said Miss Osgood. ‘You are more lucky or better served than many people I have heard of, who have made alterations to their houses. Only four months, or is it five? I have heard of the work being delayed nearly a year, and practically suspended, of course, in the winter months.’

Still chattering, Miss Osgood walked into Fairlawn with Margaret, and had barely finished her discourse when they reached the kitchen, where Margaret put down the bunch of new keys on top of the refrigerator. She wondered how long Miss Osgood meant to stay, and whether she ought to offer her tea. She wanted to press her frock for the evening, and look out Tom’s black socks. Would the woman never go?

But Miss Osgood had no intention of staying.

‘I must go,’ she said, abruptly checking herself. ‘Spot will be getting upset. He always howls the house down

if I leave him there alone. I thought I had better not bring him. Muddy paws on the floors.'

'Well . . .'

'I talk too much. The fault of living alone, I expect.'

'Isn't your cousin? . . . Has Mr Osgood . . . ?'

'Chris? Here to-day, and gone to-morrow. I haven't seen him since Monday, though his bed has been slept in each day, and not turned down in the morning, either. Up before I am, and comes in goodness knows when. I can't think what he does with himself all day.'

'I think you are marvellous to put up with it,' said Margaret, noting the look of strain on Miss Osgood's pale face. 'I don't think I would.'

'He isn't really responsible,' said Miss Osgood, gently. 'I'm afraid the life he has led is beginning to tell on him. There are times . . .' and she lowered her voice to a solemn bass, 'when I do believe he is more than half out of his mind.'

XV

THE Seeleys left Fairlawn at eight that Saturday evening to attend their party in London. They had their suitcases in the car and planned to return in a leisurely manner on Sunday afternoon.

But this plan was doomed to frustration. As soon as they arrived at the house of the friends who were to put them up, and whom they expected to take along to the party, they were greeted with surprise and some embarrassment.

'Didn't you get our wire?'

'No. What to say?'

'Jean's in bed with some sort of 'flu. I hadn't got your 'phone number, but I wired.'

'We didn't get it. Probably left too early.'

'I'm terribly sorry.'

'It doesn't matter a bit. Are you coming to the party, or staying to look after Jean?'

'Oh, I couldn't leave her. Too damned uncomfortable, poor kid.'

'Give her our love.'

Margaret added, 'Send her down to us to convalesce, next week.'

When they had driven away, Tom asked, 'Why did you make that offer? Won't the boys be back?'

'That's the week after. This is a bit of a bind, isn't it? What do we do?'

'Drive home from the party,' said Tom. 'Very late, but it won't be the first time.'

So the Seeleys found themselves, at two o'clock next morning, unlocking the doors of the Fairlawn garage,

putting the car away, locking up again, and walking, on dance-tired feet, up the drive to the front door.

It was a windless night, with a pale mist covering the full moon, turning its rays into a twilight, in which the unsubstantial ghosts of the bushes and trees seemed to move closer to them as they passed. Margaret shivered; the damp fingers of the mist were cold on her face.

'You're tired,' said Tom, sympathetically. 'It was bad luck not being able to stay at Jean's.'

'Worse luck on Jean. No, I'm not really very tired. It's this fog—and the house . . .' She laughed nervously. 'Just for a minute I felt the house was unwelcoming. It didn't want us back. We don't belong. Why didn't you stay away? Better to stay away . . . Sorry, I'm blathering.'

'You are. You must be *very* tired. Run along in and get to bed. I'll make you a hot drink.'

Tom fumbled in his pocket for his key and opened the front door for her.

'Aren't you coming in, too?'

'Yes, I am. When I've had a little look round.'

'What on earth for, at this time of night?'

'I just thought it might be worth while, as it *is* so late, or so early, would be more accurate.'

'Oh, I see what you mean. But isn't it all over? There's nothing here now for snoopers to take an interest in.'

'Probably not. You run along in. I won't be long.'

Margaret was in bed when Tom joined her. She said sleepily, 'Waste of time, wasn't it?'

'Not altogether. The front door of Fairholme was not locked.'

'*What?*'

Margaret sat up in bed, wide awake in a second.

'I shut it myself, after I showed Miss Osgood round. I know I did.'

'Are you certain the catch was down?'

'Yes. Well, practically certain. I never clicked it up when we went in, so I just had to pull the door shut when we left.'

'Nevertheless, the door was closed, but not locked.'

'Where's the key?'

'Oh, I made sure of that. The key is on the ring with the other keys, in the kitchen here.'

'Then I must have put the lock on the catch. I don't remember, though . . .'

'Or else someone came in here, for the key, went and opened it, and put the key back.'

'Leaving it open? Why?'

'To go in again, perhaps.'

Margaret shivered, as she had in the drive, but this time the chill was within.

'The Osgoods,' she said, in a low voice. 'It could only be the Osgoods.'

'It's time we got their spare keys from them,' said Tom, briskly, getting into bed in his turn. 'If it wasn't such an awkward thing to ask. So seemingly pointless, or so revealing. Both very embarrassing.'

Margaret nodded.

'Anyway, you've put a stopper on it this time,' she said. 'By shutting the door.'

'Oh, but I didn't.' Tom smiled to himself. 'I left it.'

Seeing her look of horror, he laughed aloud. 'Don't be silly. There's absolutely nothing to take in Fairholme, except drums of paint, and distemper. I had a look round, naturally, to see there was no one there.'

'A complete look round?'

Tom grinned.

'Actually, I stuck my head into the hall and listened.'

Margaret smiled too. She was beginning to believe she must have left the door with the catch up by mistake.

'And you heard deep breathing and a hollow groan?'

'No.'

'There was a death-like hush, reminding you of the grave?'

'No, there was a slight scratching noise, reminding me of jackdaws.'

'Oh, God! Not again! Mrs Holbrook and I have been suspecting jackdaws in those chimneys.'

'We'll have another look round in the morning. Later *this* morning, that is. For jackdaws or any other manifestations.'

But they did not wait as long as they intended. It was still before dawn, and dark now, when Margaret, struggling into consciousness from a dream of confused activity, ending in a long motor drive through the fringes of a forest fire, found the crackling sounds louder and more menacing than those of her dream, and a choking mist pervading the room.

She roused Tom, not without difficulty, and they rushed out into the drive.

It was at once obvious that Fairholme was burning. Smoke was pouring in a thick column from the bedroom window that Margaret had opened earlier in the day, and through the smoke a red glow came and went in the darkness. The moon had gone down now and the sky was clouded; the mist of two hours before was only a sharp chill on the breath.

'Get 999!' said Tom quickly. 'I'll see if it's serious.'

'Be careful, darling!'

'Buck up! 999.'

Margaret rushed in to the telephone, then back to her room to climb quickly into a pair of slacks and a sweater. At the front door, running out again, she nearly collided with Tom, who was leaning on the top step, coughing the smoke out of his lungs.

'Did you get them?' he gasped, when he saw her.

'Yes. Oldford. They're on the way by now.'

'It's in the loft. The cover of the opening fell down on the landing, blazing, just as I got to the top of the stairs. I pulled it away, and stamped it out, and pulled the ladder out of the way, too. We couldn't get up with buckets. Have to wait for the hoses.'

'What made all the *crackling*? There's nothing to burn in the loft.'

'Don't know. My God!'

They clutched one another, frozen by a scream that echoed in the empty house next door. When it was repeated, fainter, despairing, they waited only to snatch up scarves and wind them round their faces. In a matter of seconds they were back in the burning house, fighting their way up the stairs, now heavy with smoke and hot from the bonfire above. At the same time, the fire engine from Oldford, clanging its bell even after it had turned in at the gate, charged up the drive, and came to a stop in a shower of sprayed gravel.

The firemen were into Fairholme just as Tom and Margaret made their discovery. So the former came upon a close group, veiled in the smoke on the landing, and promptly rescued the lot.

'Put me down!' cried Margaret, through her scarf, half laughing and half crying from excitement, terror, and shock. 'I'm perfectly all right.'

She dragged the scarf away from her face to see Tom, in the drive, again crouched above that third figure whom they had found on the landing. She clutched the arm of the fireman who had brought her down the stairs so unceremoniously.

'Is he dead?' she heard her voice say, strangely hoarse.

'No,' Tom answered her. 'But he damn well ought to be. Don't come over.'

'The ambulance . . .' Margaret began, faintly.

'We've seen to that,' the Fire Captain told her. 'Come indoors, madam. Out of the wet. Show me where we can put him.'

'What was he doing? How did he get in? Why . . . ?'

'Come along, madam. We've got it nicely in hand. Lucky it was only that builders' rubbish in the loft. The rooms are hardly touched, but we'll give them a sprinkle. Yes, Mr Seeley's coming in, too. The ambulance won't be long. You just show me the way, madam, to where we can put the poor chap. And a couple of rugs. Lucky he's unconscious.'

The small procession passed slowly into the Seeleys' flat. Tom turned to the Fire Captain.

'As I recognise this man . . .'

'You're sure of that, sir?'

'Perfectly sure. It is the cousin of a Miss Osgood, who lives in the village. Why he was in the empty house next door will have to be found out later. But she ought to be told.'

'The police, too,' said Margaret, indignantly. 'He may have set fire to it deliberately.'

'Of course. But Miss Osgood as well.'

'Not you, Tom. Don't you see?'

'I'll ring up the constable for you,' said the Fire Captain, 'and he can break it to the lady and bring her along. His number's in the book, I take it?'

He went away to the telephone, and came back presently.

'He heard our bell and is up already. He's gone along to Miss Osgood now. It seems she told him only the other day she hasn't seen this cousin of hers for the last few weeks, except occasionally for meals.'

'She told me that, too,' said Margaret. 'But we've seen him about in the village, haven't we, Tom?'

'That's why I recognised him,' Tom answered.

The fire brigade had finished their business about the time the ambulance arrived. They were able to move their gear to leave a clear space for it in front of the door of Fairlawn. The St. John's men, in their swift unhurried way, had the stretcher inside the house in a matter of seconds.

'He seems pretty bad,' Tom told them. 'Must have been in the loft and fell out of it. We didn't find him till the second time we went in.'

'Get a splint,' said one of the men to the other. 'Right tib and fib.'

They did their work quickly. The limp form under their hands scarcely moved, even when they straightened the injured leg. Only his breathing grew deeper and noisier for a time, and later seemed hardly perceptible.

'It's like as if he's drugged,' said the ambulance man.

'He may have fallen on his head and been concussed,' suggested Tom.

'I don't like the look of him,' said the Fire Captain. 'It's not the burns; from my experience I'd say they look worse than they are, and that's because the hair's all gone. They wouldn't kill him.'

'That's right.'

The St. John's men were loading the stretcher into the ambulance. There were footsteps on the gravel and into the light from the house door came the Shipworth constable and Miss Osgood.

The Fire Captain said, 'Morning, Mount. You've got the lady?' To which Mount replied, 'She took a bit of waking, and she seemed right bewildered when she come to the door in her dressing gown. But she was down again, ready to come, in a jiffy. Quick work.' He smiled kindly at Miss Osgood.

The latter, with a little cry, stepped forward.

'What has he done now?' she said, clasping her hands together.

Tom moved out from behind the ambulance door. Margaret, standing in the shadow of the porch, saw him reach out a hand to touch Miss Osgood's arm before she saw him. At the touch Miss Osgood moved instantly, gave a little strangled shriek, and stepped back. Margaret went down the steps to Tom's side. The constable, thoroughly bewildered, turned to the Fire Captain.

'Christopher!' cried Miss Osgood. 'I didn't expect . . . Where's Chris?'

'It'll be touch and go, miss,' said the ambulance man.

The driver had already climbed into his seat. The one who had spoken folded up the steps and swung himself inside.

'Let me go with him!' said Miss Osgood, urgently.

She put out her hands towards the doors as they were closing.

'Let me go too! I'm his cousin. His only relative!'

'Well, miss,' said the man, swinging himself down again. 'In that case I'll go in front where I ought. You can tap on the glass if you want help.'

'No!' cried Margaret, suddenly. 'Don't let her! She mustn't . . . mustn't . . .'

'She won't be alone,' said Constable Mount, appearing again from behind the ambulance. 'I'm going, myself. It's all right, Miss Osgood. You won't be alone.'

Margaret said weakly to Tom, 'Take me inside, darling. I can't see.'

When she came round from her faint Margaret found Dr Matheson and Tom sitting one on each side of her bed. Her table lamp was on, but the curtains had been drawn back and the cold light of morning filled the windows.

'You shouldn't have bothered him,' she said reproachfully to Tom. 'On a Sunday morning, too.'

'I wasn't called to you,' Dr Matheson said, understanding her. 'The Fire Brigade rang me for the casualty. But he was whisked out of the gate in the ambulance just as I was about to turn in.'

A warning glance passed between him and Tom; it did not escape Margaret.

'He's dead, isn't he?' she said, and shut her eyes.

'Yes. I rang up the Oldford General. He died in the ambulance, I'm afraid.'

'What was it? The burns? Shock?'

'They aren't quite sure.'

Margaret struggled into a sitting position.

'Oh, no!' she cried. 'Oh, no! Not again!'

The two men did not misunderstand her.

'We were not expected home to-night,' Tom explained. 'We keep the key to Fairholme on the frig. in our kitchen. When we came back—unexpectedly—we put the car away and locked the garage door. I left the garage shut and locked when we went to the party, because we thought we would be away till to-morrow, I mean, to-day. When we

came back I found the door of Fairholme closed, but not locked.'

'And he left it like that,' said Margaret. 'Asking for trouble! And never even went over the house to see if anyone was there.'

'Should I have seen anyone?'

'He had fallen out of the loft, I think you said?' Dr Matheson put in, frowning.

'I heard a little scratching noise,' Tom said slowly. 'It must have been him, arranging the fire.'

'We thought it was jackdaws,' said Margaret, her face working.

Dr Matheson said nothing, but packed up his bag and took his leave. On the front steps he turned to Tom.

'There's one thing that strikes me rather forcibly,' he said. 'I wonder if it has occurred to you.'

'What is that?' asked Tom.

The doctor waved his hand in the direction of the Howards' house, dimly seen in the dawn light.

'At the time of the other fire, the fire at Fairlawn,' he said, 'your neighbours were on the spot at once. This time they are conspicuous by their absence. And yet there must have been a good deal of noise here, shouting, the hoses, the heavy vehicles. Enough to rouse them, you'd think.'

'Enough to rouse the whole string of houses,' agreed Tom. 'But nobody came.'

'I don't agree about the others. The Pargitters are too old, and deaf into the bargain. The others have children—might not want to scare them. Might not hear; they are some way off. But the Howards; I must say, that strikes me as odd. Perhaps, like you, they were away at a party, and did not come home.'

'Perhaps that's it,' said Tom.

When the doctor had driven away he walked round the house, keeping on the grass verge of the drive and the garden path. He was just in time to see, from the far end

of the lawn, a single light go off in the kitchen of the Howards' house.

Christopher Osgood had died in the ambulance before reaching Oldford General Hospital. Neither Miss Osgood nor Constable Mount realised this fact at the time, and it came as a considerable shock to them when the ambulance men, on taking out the stretcher at the casualty doors of the hospital, stooped over it, muttered to one another, and to the nurse who was there to direct them, and then announced their conviction as they set off inside with their burden.

Miss Osgood refused to believe it until the doctor on duty confirmed the fact. Then she broke down, became quite hysterical, and declared that she would not leave the body until it had been decently prepared for burial.

But here the village constable, surmounting his general bewilderment, asserted his authority. It was a police job, he explained. The coroner's officer at Oldford must be informed immediately. All accidental deaths meant inquests and inquiries made by the police. The body must not be touched until the coroner's officer arrived. Particularly in the circumstances.

'What does he mean?' sobbed Miss Osgood, making no apparent effort to understand.

'There, there, dear,' said the nurse. 'Come with me where you can wait for them. Or would you rather go home?'

'She can't do that,' said Mount, too loudly. 'She's the only living relative as I know of, and a material witness besides.'

'Witness to what?' asked the doctor. He had confirmed that the new casualty was dead. Really, the ambulance men had no right to bring corpses into the hospital casualty department. It should have gone straight into the mortuary. He saw no point in making any further examination of it himself, since a full post-mortem would be performed later.

'Witness to what?' he repeated. 'Do you mean the fire?'

'It was out,' cried Miss Osgood. 'When I got there it was out.'

She buried her face in her handkerchief and her shoulders shook with sobs.

'What is all this?' asked the doctor, irritably. He had been roused by this call, for the second time that night, and whereas in the first case an urgent operation had justified his loss of sleep, a corpse was merely a bore and an imposition.

The constable drew himself up.

'Party found in burning house, sir. Empty house, no business to be there. Trespassing.' Lowering his voice, he added, 'Character known to the police, sir.'

'Indeed.'

The young doctor glanced again at the swollen bluish features of the dead man, the blistered hands and torn and scorched clothing. Then he turned to Miss Osgood.

'Your husband?' he asked, gently.

'No! Certainly not!' The baleful glance she turned on him dried up all his sympathy. 'What an idea! He was merely a cousin. I'm not married.'

She spoke as if she repudiated an accusation of impropriety, and the doctor hurriedly apologised.

'I'm sorry. You seemed to be so upset . . .'

'I am upset. It's a long story. A long, sad story. . . . You wouldn't understand. Too long. Oh, too long!'

The doctor frowned, then held out a hand to the nurse. 'Prescription form, please, nurse.'

He wrote rapidly.

'Get Sister to fix her up in a cubicle with this for a few hours' rest. Officer, you'll be staying till the Oldford C.I.D. come up, I take it? Do you want to 'phone them?'

'Can I do it from here, sir?'

'The porter in the hall will put you through to our exchange.'

'I meant from here. This department,' said Constable

Mount, doggedly. 'I mustn't leave the body now, till they come.'

'It won't run away,' said the doctor, smiling.

But Mount was not able to enjoy hospital jokes.

'I don't expect it to, sir,' he said, stiffly. 'But I mustn't let it out of my sight.'

'The 'phone's at that end,' said the doctor, pointing down the long casualty ward. 'Nurse will show you.'

He bent down to pat Miss Osgood's shoulder as he left.

'Nurse will give you a capsule for your nerves,' he said.

'I want you to lie down for a bit. You are suffering from shock. When you have rested you will be in better shape to answer any questions the police ask you about the . . . about your cousin.'

'Thank you,' she answered faintly.

When he had gone she got up from her chair. Nurse was at the other end of the room with the constable, showing him the telephone. Which cubicle was Christopher in? This one? No, empty. Why were they all so exactly alike? 'This? She slipped inside.

But she had only had time to pull back the blanket that covered the body when a hand fell on her shoulder. She jumped back with a shrill scream.

'Nurse!' demanded Sister, still keeping one hand on Miss Osgood's shoulder, while with the other about her waist she propelled her gently but firmly from the cubicle. 'Is this the patient Dr Grant wrote up for?'

The nurse came running.

'Yes, Sister.'

'You should not have left her. Come along, dear,' she said to Miss Osgood. 'Over this side. I want you to take off your shoes and your coat and your skirt. Any corsets? Better loosen them. Now take this. That's right. Lie down, while Nurse tucks you up. Quite comfortable? Now don't think of anything. You've had a big shock. Just relax. We'll look after you.'

Miss Osgood relaxed: she shut her eyes. In her handkerchief she clenched the capsule she had spat out as she

dried her lips after drinking the water Sister had given her. A near shave, it had been. The capsule, though tucked against her cheek, had nearly slipped down her throat. She gave a little sigh.

'She'll be all right,' whispered Sister. She left the cubicle where Miss Osgood lay and went back to that other curtained recess where Mount again stood on guard.

'Why don't you sit down?' she said. 'But I expect you'd like some tea. There's a canteen just to the left of the big entrance doors of this department. The way you came in. They have a staff there always, for the night porters, and so on.'

'I'd rather stay here, Sister, if you don't mind.'

Sister looked at him thoughtfully. She considered the cubicle she had just left. There had been something odd about that little woman. Something strangely urgent in her attitude when she had come across her bending over the dead man, her cousin. Urgent and queer. Almost threatening. She did not understand it, but she welcomed the constable's attitude. The dead could not look after themselves.

'I'll get Nurse to fetch you a cup,' she said.

Miss Osgood heard the order given, at no great distance from her cubicle, where she still lay obediently with her eyes closed. Several times during the next half-hour, when the casualty ward seemed to be deserted, she got up softly and parted her curtains to look across at the other row of cubicles. The curtains there were not quite closed round the place where they had laid Christopher. But each time she looked out she saw the same black trouser leg, and heavy black boot, and knew that she was helpless.

And so it was that the police discovered, in the pocket of a belt Christopher Osgood had worn by day and kept under his pillow at night, a folded typewritten document, which surprised them considerably, and gave them a good deal to think about. But some time before this discovery, having heard Constable Mount's story, they had taken a few particulars from Miss Osgood, and sent her home in a

police car to Bankside. Thwarted, the battle to all seeming lost, she was, nevertheless, curiously reassured by her interview. The police, in their friendly, even admiring, manner, seemed to imply that not everyone would have shown such solicitude for a man who was clearly best off where he now found himself.

XVI

THE inquest in Oldford, on the remains of Christopher Osgood, caused something of a sensation.

To begin with there were the circumstances of his death. Nobody knew what he had been doing at Fairholme, but that he had no business to be there at all was quite clear and obvious. Even assuming that he had entered the house, finding the door open, intending to see what he could pick up there of any value to himself, what could possibly have led him to climb into the loft and shut himself in? The builders' men all declared that they had left no rubbish of any kind in the attic. Alf, giving evidence, in a black suit and stiff white collar, and looking the picture of solid English respectability, was positive on this head. There *was* rubbish, inflammable stuff, too, downstairs, he said, but who was going to cart it up into the attic unless for no good purpose? He implied that Christopher Osgood's action meant arson, no less. And most of those present agreed with him.

But the excitement was intensified when the court got down to the medical detail. For the post-mortem examination had revealed only very superficial burns and a simple fracture of the right leg. These injuries should not have caused death from shock, and were most unlikely to have produced the deep unconsciousness from which the dead man had been suffering when brought out of the burning house, and from which he never recovered. Nor could it have been caused by the smoke, for he had not been overcome in the loft or he would not have been able to fling himself out of it; and he was rescued from the landing within a few minutes of arriving there. He had no serious head injuries; only the superficial scorching of the face and

scalp, which had looked far worse than it really was. Other causes of coma had been searched for. Christopher Osgood's habits and mode of life, including his unsavoury past, were well known to the police, and were passed on to the pathologist who conducted the post-mortem. This led to a very full investigation, which showed that a heavy, but not lethal dose of barbiturate, combined with an equally heavy dose of whisky, had been taken within three hours of death. The combination of the two, always dangerous, had proved fatal, quite apart from any other injury.

The actual cause of death, therefore, was not in doubt. But a verdict was most difficult to arrive at. Was it an accident, brought about through mental confusion, in an habitual drunkard, accustomed to living an irregular and reckless life? Or was it an elaborate suicide, by a man with his wits deranged, and a grudge against imagined enemies, who had supplanted him in his former home?

After the medical evidence had been taken, the inquest was adjourned for a fortnight. During the interval before it was resumed all these questions were discussed at great length in the local Press, in every house in Shipworth, and in many in Oldford as well.

It was during the adjournment that the police again visited Fairlawn.

'Do you want the key?' asked Margaret. 'I don't think you'll need it, because the workmen are in there.'

'I wanted to have a word with you or your husband, if it's convenient.'

'Inspector Ford, isn't it?'

'Yes, madam. I am Inspector Ford.'

Margaret led the inspector into her sitting room and offered him a chair and a cigarette, both of which he accepted.

'In the course of our inquiries,' he began, when they were both settled, 'it seems to us fairly obvious that this man Osgood has been frequenting Shipworth and particularly this house, almost non-stop since his last discharge from gaol. Saunders' men told us about the cellar window

and so on. Now it seems to us you could perhaps throw some light on what has been going on. It might have been better if you'd come forward earlier. Some of all this might have been avoided.'

Margaret sat up straight.

'I think I'll wait until my husband comes home,' she said. 'There *are* things we can tell you; they may have to do with Christopher Osgood or they may not. But I'd rather tell Tom before . . .'

'Perhaps I can help you,' said Inspector Ford. 'Do you know anything about a will—a typewritten copy of a will?'

'Mrs Osgood's will!' exclaimed Margaret.

'Ah! Then you do.' The inspector smiled at her. 'No need to wait for Mr Seeley. We found that will on the body.'

'Then it *was* Christopher. We were right.'

'Perhaps you'd like to make a statement, Mrs Seeley? Anything you happen to know about that paper. Where it came from. Where it went.'

'You won't blame Uncle George, will you? He was taking it to his solicitor when it was stolen.'

'Just start at the beginning,' said the inspector, patiently. 'As far as we're concerned at present there is no criminal action except the late Osgood's. Take your time over it.'

The resumed inquest, a fortnight after the adjournment, was, as Mrs Holbrook told Margaret afterwards, 'As good as a play.'

The coroner and the police with him had been concerned to discover why Christopher Osgood should take it into his head to visit an empty house in the middle of the night, climb into the loft, and there, already under the influence of drugs and alcohol, collect a pile of builders' rubbish and set it alight. Why should he do this, shutting himself in at the same time? Even taking into account his past history, his general instability, bordering, as Miss Osgood in her evidence had shown, on a mental breakdown, this

act of his seemed altogether too eccentric, too fantastic, too utterly pointless. Apart, that is, from Mrs Osgood's second will.

It was the revelations in respect of this will that gave Mrs Holbrook, in the public gallery of the court house, such rare and satisfactory entertainment.

The discovery of the will on the dead body, related by Inspector Ford, was followed by evidence of its history, told in turn by the vicar, Tom Seeley, the Metropolitan Police, the Waterloo Lost Property Office, and Miss Osgood herself.

'Which I'd take with a grain of salt,' said Mrs Holbrook, describing the scene to Margaret next day. 'Standing up there, on her oath, as meek as mild, butter wouldn't melt in 'er mouth. "Mother told me what she was going to do," she says, "but I never saw the will. I thought as it did not reach our solicitors that she had changed her mind. I never thought of Chris taking it and hiding it," she says, "but I see now he must have done so." And do you know,' went on Mrs Holbrook indignantly, 'not one of them clever gentlemen up and asked why should he have hidden it? Why should he? If it went to the solicitors he stood to gain by it, didn't he?'

'According to what was in the will,' began Margaret, 'he did. But I understand . . .'

'Ah!' said Mrs Holbrook. 'But that come later. In my opinion 'e hid it *because 'e didn't want it to go to the solicitors*. But 'e knew if 'e didn't hide it, Miss Osgood would destroy it. That's why.'

'You certainly have something there,' agreed Margaret. 'And he couldn't take it away with him, because he was going to be arrested and knew it, and knew he would be searched, and it would be taken away when it was found on him.'

'That's right,' said Mrs Holbrook, with an approving look. 'Well, where was I?'

'Miss Osgood's evidence,' said Margaret.

'I never seen her look so pleased with herself as when she

stood down,' said Mrs Holbrook, 'and I will say for her she knows how to take a knock.'

'You mean when she heard . . . ?'

'That's right. When her solicitor up and said the will was no good. That was a surprise, that was. A big surprise. I don't believe she was prepared for it, either. They were all watching her, and she went very white, but she didn't stir a muscle. When the solicitor chap went on to say as how Mrs Osgood hadn't consulted him or he'd 'ave explained to her how the property was not hers to give, but went to Miss Osgood from her grandfather—in trust, like—she got out her handkerchief and pretended to wipe her eyes.'

'We mustn't be too hard on her,' said Margaret. 'She was genuinely fond of her grandfather. She has often told me so. Besides, it must have been a real shock to her. She thought the will was valid, otherwise she wouldn't . . .'

Margaret stopped herself in time, but Mrs Holbrook's eyes brightened.

'She wouldn't have done all she did for Mr Crooked Christopher, you mean? That's my opinion, and the opinion of most of us. Blackmail, him holding the will over her, knowing himself it wasn't no good, but knowing she thought it was.'

This was not exactly what Margaret had meant, but she nodded.

'I think he did blackmail her—yes.'

'That touched her where it hurt,' said Mrs Holbrook, unfeelingly.

Margaret felt that the conversation had gone on long enough.

'What conclusion did the coroner arrive at after all this evidence about the will?'

'Right off the point,' said Mrs Holbrook. 'It was only to be expected, them not knowing Miss Osgood as well as what we do in Shipworth. Though why Mr Mount didn't explain . . . But there, that Inspector Ford talked him down, I daresay. The coroner took it for granted Mr

Osgood hid the will so it wouldn't influence Miss Osgood into doing what her mother wanted. Then the house would come to him. They took it he didn't know the grandfather's action on her behalf.'

'It really could have been like that, I suppose,' said Margaret, doubtfully.

'Don't you believe it! Anyway, the coroner said it might be he'd got to know later he made a mistake, and was so angry and disappointed he made up his mind, being half insane, to burn down the place to keep it from Miss Osgood.'

'But that's nonsense!' exclaimed Margaret. 'It was already sold—to us.'

'That's what my Jack said, the moment I told him. A rare muddle that coroner was in. And no further on with regard to how the fire was started.'

'But they did decide how he got into Fairholme, didn't they?'

'He had a key on 'im, key to this house.'

'We always suspected he had one of the old Fairlawn keys,' said Margaret. 'So he could have come in and taken the Fairholme key, unlocked the door, and put the key back in here. That would account for the lock being on the catch. He left it like that so that he could go in again, and never altered it.'

'If it *was* him did all that?' said Mrs Holbrook.

'What do you mean?'

'With the drugs and the drink working in him? I wonder.' Mrs Holbrook looked away. 'Fires,' she said, 'and nobody knows how they started. Except the good God above.'

'Oh!' said Margaret, exasperated. 'You aren't suggesting *this* fire was a judgement, too, are you? It might have burned the whole house down, and us into the bargain.'

'But it didn't,' said Mrs Holbrook calmly. 'Trust the Lord in His might.'

Margaret led the conversation back to less thorny ground.

'The verdict was misadventure, wasn't it?'

'Misadventure, through mixing the drugs, aggravated by shock caused by burns and fractures, the both caused by the balance of 'is mind being upset.' Mrs Holbrook paused to deliver a personal rider. 'Which, as I see it, is all my eye and Betty Martin.'

Inspector Ford made one more visit to Fairlawn, after the inquest, but this was only for the purpose of giving Margaret the key found in Christopher Osgood's pocket.

'We were sure someone had a key,' Margaret said, and added, with slight hesitation, 'I suppose this is the only one?'

The inspector looked at her thoughtfully.

'Who do you think might have another?'

'Miss Osgood.'

'Oh, yes. You had your doubts of her behaviour, hadn't you?'

'I told you everything my husband and I had noticed. A great many things we must now conclude were Christopher's work, we originally decided were hers.'

'I see. Yes, I noted your views.'

His face was quite expressionless. Margaret could not decide whether or not he was at all interested in her opinion.

'You *are* quite satisfied the fire next door was started by Christopher, aren't you?' she could not help asking.

'You heard the evidence, madam, or rather Mr Seeley did. The coroner found it misadventure. He did not commit himself to an opinion about the cause of the fire, but the verdict implied that Osgood started it, without any suicidal intention.'

'You won't tell me what you truly think!' cried Margaret, nettled by this piece of officialese.

'I'll tell you this much,' said Inspector Ford, suddenly becoming human. 'We didn't find any evidence of Fairholme being entered by anyone except Osgood himself. Any stranger, that is. The builders' marks are all over it, and yours and Mr Seeley's in places, but no one else's. If

you have any reason to think anyone else were there, you just let me know.'

'I will,' Margaret promised him.

When Tom came home she told him what the inspector had said.

'We haven't any reason to think anyone else *was* there,' said Tom, sadly.

'We might have,' Margaret answered.

'Why?'

'Miss Osgood took a lot of waking, but was down in half a jiffy, ready to come,' she said. 'End of quote. What Constable Mount said. Don't you remember?'

'So what?'

'If it was Miss Osgood who laced Christopher's whisky with barbiturates, and Miss Osgood who set fire to the loft, and ran away home only a little while before we gave the alarm, then she would hardly have time to get there and undress before Mount arrived. I think she was "slow to wake", because she had to take off her outer clothes and fling on a dressing gown to go down to the door. But she was ready very quickly because she still had most of her clothes on underneath.'

'Could be,' Tom agreed. 'But I don't see how we are going to prove it. And you realise what you are saying, don't you? If she started the fire, it was murder.'

'Yes. And her mother, too. That was murder.'

'But the will was not valid after all. She had nothing to fear from the will.'

'Did she know that? She will say so now, and no one can disprove it. But did she know? Wasn't Chris blackmailing her?'

Tom nodded.

'We can't prove anything. She's in a very strong position, either way, isn't she?'

Margaret got up impulsively.

'Let's go and look at Fairholme again. We might notice something. I was there that Saturday afternoon, showing her over. She looked at everything, loft included: she must

have seen everything I saw. She certainly came into the kitchen with me and watched me park the key on the frig. I can't help it. I felt when she came along the drive towards the ambulance that she was wrong somehow—false. She overplayed her upset about Christopher. We know she loathed the sight of him. She was all strung up, but it came out wrong. That was what made me faint, I think.'

'Aren't you getting a bit fanciful?' Tom answered. But he fetched the Fairholme key and they walked round together to the empty house.

As Tom was putting the key in the lock, Alf appeared in the drive behind them. They waited for him to come near.

'Not going in for some overtime, are you?' Tom asked him.

It was already half-past eight; a fine August evening, with the sun beginning to go down behind the trees in the drive. Alf grinned, then his face set in sterner lines.

'I was going to get you to let me in,' he said. 'It's something I didn't want to mention before the others. There's been a power of gossip in Shipworth since the fire. No sense in adding to it.'

'Come in,' said Tom. 'Tell us exactly what you want.'

Alf led the way upstairs. Though the accident was now over three weeks old, the landing had not been touched since it happened. The builders had been working downstairs, with strict orders not to go up. Naturally, as Alf explained, they'd all been up for a look round, but they understood that the police had work to do there. Mount, in particular, had drummed it into them.

'But now I understand they've called it off,' said Alf. 'Or so Mount tells me.'

'Yes,' said Margaret. 'Inspector Ford told me, too.'

'Come on, Alf,' said Tom. 'What's bothering you?'

Alf pushed up his cap and rubbed his hair. They were all standing together now on the landing, staring up at the opening in the ceiling that led into the loft.

'This ladder,' said Alf, laying his hand on it, where it lay on the floor. 'You found it leaning up against the side of the hole?'

'Yes. I pulled it away because the burning cover fell out and landed against the foot of it.'

'That was why Chris Osgood couldn't get down,' said Margaret. 'Why he fell out, or jumped out, to escape the fire.'

'The ladder's not burned at all,' said Alf. 'No more is the paint, nor the flooring, except that one scorched board where the cover fell and you stamped it out. But where's my rope?'

'Your rope?' asked Tom and Margaret together.

'The derrick's up there still,' said Alf, calmly, putting the ladder in position and climbing up it to look at his tool. 'The heat hasn't done it any harm, being metal, and it not getting much of a hold before they put it out. But the rope wasn't up there with it. I left it down here on the floor near the ladder. They were both shifted, but the ladder's still here, and the rope's gone.'

'Yes, it *was* here,' said Margaret. 'I remember seeing it. Coiled up by the wall.'

'That's right,' said Alf. He climbed on into the loft, and disappeared from view. Tom followed him, with Margaret close behind.

'That's a funny thing,' said Alf.

He stooped to pick up something.

'Can you see? I can't,' Tom said. 'I brought a torch. Half a minute.'

'I thought they put a light in here for you to work by,' said Margaret.

'We done away with that a couple of days before the accident,' said Alf.

'Oh.' Tom sounded despondent. 'For a second I hoped it might have been a short or something that started the fire.'

'We should have heard that by now,' said Margaret.

'Human hands brought up the rubbish,' said Alf.

Tom took the torch out of his pocket and shone it on the object in Alf's hand. It was a metal ring with a short length of rope fastened to it. The rope had a bowline tied in it near the ring, and was frayed just beyond the knot.

'This looks like it,' Alf said. 'What's left of it.'

Tom turned the torch on to the derrick. There was no rope through the pulley, nothing but the pulley arm and the strong base.

'That isn't rope,' said Margaret, pointing to a fragment which was fastened to the frayed hemp in Alf's hand.

'Come down into the light,' said Tom. 'if you've finished up here.'

'I've done now,' said Alf. 'Now I know my rope was burned. But dang me if I know how it got up here of all places. I left it . . .'

Margaret was going swiftly down the ladder. The others followed.

'Alf!' she said, as she turned at the foot of the ladder. 'Alf, you used that thing for hauling up loads of bricks for the loft partition, didn't you?'

'Yes, ma'am. We use it for getting heavy weights up or down.'

'Does it take a lot of weight? I mean, could I work it, for instance?'

'Yes. I daresay you could, once or twice. Not to go on all day, I shouldn't think. Unless you doubled up the pulley.'

'That would halve the weight?'

'Quarter it,' said Tom. 'It's halved as it is.'

'Anyway, if I used it, I could haul up a considerable weight?'

'I should think so.'

Margaret turned to Tom.

'Then that's how she did it.'

'What?'

'She got him round here on some pretext or other; probably got him half canned first. When he was too far

gone to know what was happening, and incapable of resisting her, she put the rope round him and pulled him up into the loft. She must have arranged the fire earlier in the evening. She was just going to put a match to it when she heard our car turn into the drive. She did a bunk, leaving the catch up on the door, so that she could come in again.'

'Then the noise I heard, that I thought was jackdaws, must have been that poor devil thrashing about.'

'That's bad,' said Alf, solemnly, 'if it's as you say.'

'The whole thing is horrible!' said Margaret. 'When she'd given us time to settle down she went back and lit her bonfire. She may have pulled the rope off him then, taking a bit of his coat with it. She wouldn't want the charred corpse found trussed up. But she was in a hurry; she didn't undo all the knots. And she made a mistake. She ought to have put the rope back on the landing. Of course she expected to burn the whole place down. She'd think, as we came in late, we would sleep sound. The devil, not even caring what happened to us!'

Tom was considering.

'Why was he able to get out of the loft?' he said, doubtingly. 'If he was active enough to do that, he'd have resisted her, surely, earlier on? Wouldn't those drugs be in action by then?'

'The fire must have roused him,' said Alf. 'Just enough, I reckon. It was dry stuff she used, if it was her; it wouldn't make much smoke at first, not to suffocate before burning, I mean.'

'Oh, Alf,' said Margaret. 'I forgot you weren't in all this. We oughtn't to have said so much in front of you.'

'Not in it?' Alf was indignant. 'We've all been in it, and it's not over yet, not by a long chalk. This is a police job, and I'm handing them my rope.' He got out his handkerchief and wrapped up the trophy. 'Might have fingerprints on the ring. Sam Mount'll jump for joy when he sees this. It might mean promotion, and that's been a long, long time coming to him.'

'I don't think you ought to repeat what we've just been saying.'

'About Miss Osgood?'

'I didn't say her name. I suppose you guessed I meant her.'

'Bless your heart, yes,' said Alf. 'But I won't say nothing. She'd be up to the job, mind you, though he was a big, heavy man, but I doubt the rope would be up to it. It was pretty near wore out, and I ought to have had a new one a long while back, but Mr Green wouldn't listen. He'll have to listen now.'

And Alf put his find in his pocket, settled his cap on his head, wished them good-night, and clattered away down the stairs.

'I wonder what Inspector Ford will make of that?' said Tom.

XVII

A MONTH went by, and Shipworth, after the excitement of the fire, settled back into its usual calm.

At Fairlawn the conversion was nearly complete. Only a few finishing touches to the decorations there were needed, and already a trench had been dug across the drive, marking the place where a hedge would separate the two properties. Tom's rough clearing through the shrubbery to the road had been expanded, with the help of a bulldozer, into a new drive with a gate at the road end of it. Several trees had been cut down to make a space for turning near the garage.

So much for the front of the house. At the back much clearing had also been done, and more was planned. Here the Seeleys intended to put up a fence to separate the gardens. The line of the division was marked with pegs, and on the Fairlawn side of it Tom and Margaret had also marked out a broad bed to carry flowering shrubs and bushes.

'Azaleas, chiefly,' said Margaret. 'If they'll grow here.'

'Why shouldn't they?'

'They won't grow on chalk.'

'This isn't chalky. Or not that I've noticed.'

'It's not far from the north downs. But we can always dig down a bit and see if we get to chalk.'

'Turn the boys on to it.'

'I don't suppose the fence will be up before they go back to school. No good doing any extensive digging till the men have come with the fence.'

This did not happen for another two weeks, and the

school term had in fact started by the time the fence arrived. But it took very little time to erect, and by the week-end was in place, tall and plain and straight, and decidedly ugly, Margaret thought.

'We've got to dig our bed in front of it,' she told Tom on Saturday morning. 'And the sooner the better. I want to order my shrubs now, so that they can go in next month.'

They began to dig that afternoon, at a point where laurels had been cleared to set up the fence.

'It's rather a shame Fairholme gets the compost heap,' said Tom, copying Bill Howard in climbing on the barrow to look over the fence.

'It's only an old compost heap. We haven't used it this year. We made a new one in the kitchen garden. I can't think why they had one over here, unless it was for the rose beds, and they generally have farm manure.'

Tom climbed down again.

'Anyway, it isn't so hard to dig as it will be when we get back to the lawn. The bulldozer seems to have done most of it just here.'

'So much the better. We want a big piece at the bottom of the garden, with rhododendrons at the back and azaleas in front. No more laurels for us.'

Tom took his spade to the end of the fence where it joined the wall.

'I'm starting where the bulldozer left off,' he said. 'They yanked quite a tree out here and there's a nice soft hole where it was. If I dig a bit deeper in front of it I can fill the hole in and find out about that chalk that worries you.'

'You'd better have the fork, then,' said Margaret. 'Give me the spade. I'll start cutting turf.'

'Take your first row back to the other end, then,' said Tom. 'To fill up the last trench.'

'Aren't we getting professional?'

She cut a row of turfs, put them in the wheelbarrow and took them away over the lawn to the marking pegs. When

she came back she found Tom leaning on his fork, staring into the hole he had made.

‘Don’t tell me you’ve struck chalk?’

‘No. Something much more peculiar. Look.’

Margaret looked, and continued to stare. Then she said, ‘What’s so strange? You’ve gone into their dump for old tins. Perhaps they were filling up some hole or other at one time.’

‘Old tins, yes. But don’t you see they are all of one kind? And weed-killer at that.’

He got down into the trench and picked up two of the tins. They were of nearly equal size. One bore a label that had been white; the label on the other had been yellow. Both were stained with earth and rust from the metal.

‘One pound tins,’ said Margaret, reading the label. ‘Chlorate of soda. Not poisonous.’ She broke off to look up at Tom. ‘Miss Osgood told me she always used it. Five or six tins a year, to do the whole of the paths, she said.’

‘Did she?’ said Tom. ‘There must be twenty or thirty here.’

‘Three shillings a tin,’ said Margaret, going back to the label. ‘It says so on this one; it’s marked in pencil, very faded, but quite legible. She said it was splendid for paths. Actually, I meant to do the kitchen garden ones with it myself. But I never got round to it.’

‘I’d like to see just exactly how many there are here,’ said Tom. ‘I’ll chuck them out to you and you can line them up on the grass back there.’

Margaret caught the tins as he threw them to her, but made her protest at once.

‘What’s the great idea, Tom? A dump’s a dump. You’d expect them to throw the empty tins in the same place each year, though I don’t know why they didn’t use the rubbish bins, and get rid of them altogether. I should.’

‘Exactly. Tom paused in his work to stand upright. ‘That is exactly why I’m interested. Five tins a year could

have gone in the rubbish bins. Thirty tins all at once would attract attention. So they were buried.'

'But . . .' Margaret stared at him. 'Not all at once. They wouldn't be used all at once. Surely this is the result of years of weed-killing?'

'Look at the tins,' said Tom. 'How long do you think they've been here? About a couple of years? What's more, *they are all of the same vintage*, unless I'm very much mistaken.'

Margaret sorted them out according to the labels. There were five kinds altogether, twenty-seven tins in all, some a little dirtier and rustier, because more of their surface had been in contact with the earth, some less damaged because they had been surrounded by other tins.

'Don't you see?' Tom persisted. 'The dump was covered. If Miss Osgood was in the habit of burying her weed-killer tins every year there would be layers of earth between the tins. But these were all together. Twenty-seven tins buried in the ground together under a large laurel bush at the bottom of the garden, out of sight of the house.'

'You're building this up, darling, aren't you?' said Margaret. 'What are you thinking?'

'Read the label,' said Tom.

Margaret did so. The instructions were the same, the wording slightly different on the different labels. All had the same warning, some printed in red, some in larger black type. '"Caution. If allowed to dry on clothes or other combustible material they may become spontaneously inflammable, and constitute a serious FIRE HAZARD."

'Spontaneous,' echoed Margaret, becoming suddenly breathless with excitement and fear. '*Spontaneous!* Oh, Tom, have we found how it was done?'

'We've got an idea, and we've got a hell of a lot of tins,' said Tom. 'Inspector Ford can have a present of the lot.'

'Or Mount,' said Margaret. 'We must do it through Mount. That would only be fair to Shipworth.'

'Ford is the man for this job,' answered Tom. 'Mount has got Alf's rope to play with.' He picked up one tin of each kind and rounded the rest into a heap. 'These labels suggest different places of origin. A few tins bought at one shop, a few from another. Quite easy to do. Shipworth has one chemist and a general store. Oldford half a dozen of either. Not counting ironmongers and seedsmen's stores.'

'A nice little job for Inspector Ford.'

'I'll go and ring him up now, and ask him to come over. I'd like to get the cache disposed of before anyone else sees it.'

'Too late,' said Margaret, in a low voice. 'Look who's here!'

Turning round, Tom saw Bill and Buffy Howard coming smiling towards them across the lawn.

'We've pushed brazenly in,' said Buffy. 'Can we apologise? We guessed you'd be gardening.'

'I'm surprised *you're* not,' said Tom.

He and Margaret had stepped forward eagerly, very eagerly, to meet the visitors half-way across the lawn.

'Come in for a drink,' said Margaret. 'And bless you for interrupting. I was longing for a diversion. We were getting quite sick of digging, weren't we, Tom?'

'Can't we see what you've done?' asked Bill, as he found himself moving away towards the house.

'Not worth it. The scheme is in our heads, but only chaos appears near the fence. Roughly, it'll be a big bank of rhododendrons and azaleas—we hope—entirely blotting out the fence for several yards.'

'And more bushes and things this end,' said Margaret. 'I couldn't face another entire bed of flowers to weed.'

'I don't blame you,' said Bill, and Buffy exclaimed. 'Azaleas! How heavenly! I've always wanted some, but they are so expensive.'

The Howards cast a last look behind them as Tom opened the garden door, then they all passed into the house.

'I don't want to harp on it, but why aren't you gardening yourselves this rather dreary afternoon?' asked Margaret. 'The earth's quite reasonably soft. We expected to hear you all the time we were out there.'

After a little silence Bill said gruffly, 'Not worth it.'

'He means,' said Buffy, in a voice obviously meant to sound brave, 'because we're leaving.'

'Leaving?' asked Tom, coming in with bottles and glasses. 'Going on holiday, do you mean?'

'No. Leaving Shipworth.' Buffy's chin jerked up still higher. 'We've sold the house—or as good as.'

Margaret and Tom exchanged a swift glance, then turned faces of consternation on their guests.

'I'm terribly sorry,' said Margaret, and stopped. There did not seem to be anything to say that would not sound impertinent or false.

'The fact is,' said Bill Howard, 'the cost of living has definitely caught up on us at last. I've seen it coming for years. We poor devils on pensions are even worse off than the blokes with dividends. We can't even sell our investments. And the Government pays no attention to the cost of living index.'

'Sickening,' said Tom. He filled Bill's glass again; it was all he could do.

'Where are you going?' asked Margaret. 'I mean, have you got another house somewhere?'

'No. We haven't decided. It's all happened rather suddenly,' answered Bill.

Buffy took up the story, rather too brightly.

'You see, it's been coming, as Bill told you, for quite some time. So we've had the place on London agents' books. We didn't want it known locally; people are so inquisitive.'

This time Margaret carefully refrained from looking at Tom. No, the Howards wouldn't want it known locally. Too many people would be closing in with their unpaid bills, small and large. Too many people prepared to take drastic action before the possible midnight flit.

'A very nice couple, through Harrods,' said Bill, 'came down last week, thought it was their dream house, and made an excellent offer straight away. Now's the time to sell, let me tell you, if you're thinking of it.'

'We're selling Fairholme, as you know,' said Margaret, and immediately wished her words unsaid. 'We hope to get a good bit for it.'

'Nice little job, too, you've made of that,' said Bill. 'I wouldn't mind having it myself, but Buffy won't consider staying on in Shipworth.'

'Well, I ask you!' said Buffy, on a high note. 'After all the work we put into the garden and the house, to have to walk past it every day, mourning for it! I should go into a decline. I don't feel I'll ever be able to settle again.'

'We may not be very good at settling,' said Bill, and for the first time truth rang in his words. 'Never had a house of our own till this one, always furnished digs here, there, and everywhere. Buffy used to spend most of her time with her relations when I was at sea. A sailor doesn't get a home life, you know. We seem to have made a muck of it.'

'No, you haven't,' said Margaret, who was both touched and sorry he had spoken. 'You made the garden lovely.'

'Spent far too much on it,' said Bill. 'Forgot there were rates and all that sort of thing.'

'No,' said Buffy. 'It was all *my* fault. I simply can't resist clothes. Never could.'

These confessions were becoming an acute embarrassment. Tom filled up the glasses again. But the Howards seemed to realise they had said enough, and the conversation moved on to village gossip. Presently the visitors finished their drinks and rose to go.

At the door, Buffy said, 'By the way, don't spread our news too freely, will you? We wanted you to know, but it's such a bore when everyone begins yammering—the same old questions every time.'

'I won't say a thing,' said Margaret. 'There aren't many people here I'd be likely to tell. We rather fell out

of favour, we know, when we started the conversion, and since the fire, and the inquest, some people have been distinctly snooty. Which is odd, because they don't alter their behaviour to Miss Osgood, and she was a near relation of the disreputable Christopher, and had him staying in her house.'

'Miss Osgood!' cried Buffy, and a fierce light shone in her eyes. 'Just because she is an Osgood, that's why they suck up to her. Though there isn't anything special about the family that I could ever discover. But she's in with the vicar and the church party. Religious and teetotal, though she goes to parties and asks for lemonade—so awkward: why not stay away? They all seem to think now she's a sort of martyr and heroine. I don't! I shouldn't be surprised to hear she'd set light to Christopher herself!'

'Come, come!' said Bill, taking her by the arm. 'Don't put wild ideas into their heads.'

'Well, I *hate* her,' said Buffy, passionately. 'I hate her worse than anyone I've ever met.'

When Tom and Margaret had seen their visitors out of the drive they went back into the house and Tom rang up Inspector Ford. The latter was quite ready to come over from Oldford to see the weed-killer tins, and shortly afterwards arrived in a small car, driving himself. Later, he pushed a knobbly and noisy sack into the boot of the car and drove away. And for a week the Seeleys heard no more.

At the end of that time, or rather, on the Friday evening, the inspector visited Fairlawn again, and on the following day, after lunch, Tom, who had taken the car to London that morning, returned, bringing Uncle George with him.

Margaret kissed her uncle affectionately. She had not seen him since the ill-fated Sunday when he had been robbed of his brief-case.

'I hope you haven't got anything valuable with you this time,' she said.

Uncle George smiled.

'I thought all that business about the will was over,' he said. 'And a complete frost, I hear. Miss Osgood had nothing to fear. Pity she hadn't the courage to consult her solicitor when her cousin started blackmailing her.'

'A great pity,' said Tom, and added for Margaret's benefit, 'He knows the latest moves.'

'Does he know about the Howards?'

'I think it proves their share in the blackmail,' said Uncle George. 'One of them, probably the wife, got hold of that second copy of the will that the vicar refused to witness. She would realise it had no value without the signature of witnesses, but when they saw Christopher Osgood flourishing at his cousin's expense, they may have guessed what he was doing, and chanced it themselves.'

'And Miss Osgood paid up,' said Margaret. 'And Buffy settled her bills—her outstanding bills.'

'That's it,' said Tom. 'And now Miss Osgood has turned the tables on them. It's the only satisfaction she's likely to get from knowing the will was useless. She must have demanded her money back or exposure of the blackmail. That's why they're selling their house. I'd like to be sorry for them, but Bill *was* in the Navy. He ought to have done better.'

'To put it mildly,' said Tom.

'Can't stand up to this Buffy, as you call her,' said Uncle George. 'Many a good man is a moral coward where women are concerned. I am myself. Extraordinary name she has.'

'Short for Barbara, she told me once,' said Margaret.

'Pity it's turning out the way it is,' said Uncle George. 'These Howards may slip out of their trouble, where a good jolt might do them good.'

'I think Bill's had his jolt all right,' said Tom. 'He was looking pretty sick the last time he was over here.'

'The day we found the tins,' said Margaret. 'They were very anxious to know what we'd been doing, but we didn't let them see anything.'

'The tins. Yes,' said Uncle George. 'Has your Inspector Ford taken the lot away?'

'I've got one,' said Margaret. 'I ought not to have snatched it, but I did it for you. I knew you'd want to see one and read the warning yourself. I wish I'd bought some earlier. I'd have known what Mr. Holbrook meant by the things she told me. About the rug.'

'What things?'

She reminded him. There was a long silence when she had done. It was broken by Uncle George.

'If you're right, it explains Mrs Osgood's behaviour, poor woman. A judgement. That's what she said, isn't it?'

'Yes. She thought it was a judgement for not standing bail for Christopher.'

'Say that again!' Uncle George's face was lit by an unusual excitement. Margaret did as she was told. He drew a long breath.

'I wonder,' he said. And after a pause, 'If only my memory was better.'

Tom and Margaret waited politely. Uncle George looked at them, broke into a little laugh, and said, in his usual, careful, unemotional voice, 'I wonder where we would be likely to find the vicar at this time of day?'

'Mr Drummond?' said Tom, bewildered. 'What's the idea now?'

'I rather want to consult . . . well, to ask him something—a professional matter.'

'He might be at the church,' said Margaret. 'Only *she* might be doing the flowers.'

'That would not matter,' said Uncle George. 'In fact, it might be interesting to find them together.'

'I don't know what this means,' said Tom, 'but I'll drive you down to the church if you like.'

'That would be very nice,' said Uncle George, tucking Margaret's hand under his arm. 'And you must come too, my dear.'

Mr Drummond was in the nave, directing a choirboy

who was putting up the numbers of the hymns for Sunday matins the next day. The flowers had already been changed, and stood, fresh and beautiful, in the two brass vases on the altar.

When the Fairlawn party arrived Mr Drummond turned round and came forward. Margaret introduced her uncle.

'The staircase—of course,' said the vicar, prompted by Tom. 'The work has begun, I believe, but we shall not get our new pews before the spring. They will fill up the back of the nave. The memorial will be on the wall on the side near the lectern. I can show you . . .'

They followed him to the chancel steps and he pointed out the place.

'You must forgive me,' said Uncle George, as they turned away. 'Perhaps this is not the occasion to enlighten you. But there is not much time. You will be aware that the police are—uneasy. I think you have had a visit from Inspector Ford?'

'Yes,' said the vicar, gravely. 'I have.'

'He would be very angry with me for coming to you,' said Uncle George. 'But we need your help. To confirm our suspicions.'

He described the finding of the tins and their significance. He recited the warning on the label. Mr Drummond's face set in deep lines of horror.

'You remember,' went on Uncle George, steadily, 'Mrs Osgood's repeated exclamation?'

'Judgement,' said Mr Drummond, and then, in a loud voice, 'Baal!'

'That's what occurred to me, too,' murmured Uncle George.

'For the nephew,' said Tom.

'No, no!' cried the vicar, distractedly. 'Not bail. Baal! The god Baal! The sacrifice—Elijah—the two sacrifices . . .'

He stumbled in his haste as he hurried to the lectern, and leaving the marker where he had put it for the morn-

ing service, turned the pages until he found what he wanted.

The others drew near slowly, until they stood in front of the lectern.

‘The First Book of Kings,’ said Mr Drummond. ‘The eighteenth chapter, and the twentieth verse.’

XVIII

SO Ahab sent unto all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together unto Mount Carmel. And Elijah came near unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word.'

Mr Drummond lifted his eyes from the Bible.

'So Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to competition,' he said. 'Each side was to arrange a sacrifice and ask the god they worshipped to send down fire to consume it. The prophets of Baal tried everything they could think of, but with no success. Elijah not only built up his altar and laid his bullock on it, but he dug a trench round it and had the whole thing soured with water, and water poured into the trench. He waited till the evening, and then he prayed to God for a sign which would turn the Israelites back to the true faith. This is what happened.' Mr Drummond turned back to the Bible. 'Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces, and they said, The Lord he is God: the Lord, he is God.'

'Don't they have petroleum oil in those parts?' whispered Tom to Margaret. Uncle George frowned at this levity, and addressed himself to the vicar.

'When poor unfortunate Mrs Osgood's rug burst into flames,' he said, 'that was what came into her mind, no doubt; she was a religious woman, I am told, and conversant with her Bible. The horror of the whole episode, and the physical shock, and the state of her heart, must have

unhinged her mind a bit. She was incapable of coherent speech; the only thing left to her was the vivid impression of what had happened.'

Mr Drummond turned the pages of the Old Testament until it again lay open where the marker divided the pages. He stepped down from the lectern.

'It could very well be as you say,' he said, his face working. 'But what a dreadful solution that offers us! What ought we to do now? The police would find this explanation fanciful.'

'They don't think the tins of chlorate at all fanciful,' said Tom. 'Inspector Ford has been over twice since we found them. And I think I may be allowed to say that he finds I was right in thinking that they had all been bought and used and buried at about the same time. Anyway, in the course of the summer of '49, two years ago. Three of the purchases fit together rather neatly. The shops remembered it. Two small retailers were out of the stuff, but she wanted it in a hurry, so they each asked an Oldford firm of corn-chandlers, who do garden stuff, to supply them, which the firm did, and has a record of the two transactions. When a customer bought eight tins from them a few days later, and that was Miss Osgood also, they were temporarily out of it. Oh, everything falls into place. But proof in a court of law will be tricky.'

The four of them moved slowly down the aisle towards the door of the church. As they neared it they heard voices in the porch, and immediately afterwards Jack Holbrook and his mother and another man, who was a stranger to the Seeleys, appeared in the doorway.

'Are you looking for me?' asked Mr Drummond, mildly.

'Yes, sir.' Jack Holbrook stepped quickly towards him. 'It's Mount, sir. He's asking for you, particular. There's been an accident.'

'Thrown from his bike!' cried Mrs Holbrook. 'Fell to pieces under him. Right under a car, going down Forester's Hill.'

'Not killed!' exclaimed the vicar, in a voice of great anguish. 'Not *again*!'

'No, sir,' said Jack. 'He's asking for you, like I said.'

'No, praise be,' added Mrs Holbrook. 'But not for want of trying.'

'Let me tell him, Mother,' urged Jack. He lowered his voice, but seeing it was the Seeleys who stood behind Mr Drummond, gave them a quick nod of recognition, and spoke loud enough for them to hear.

'It seems he had the presence of mind to throw himself clear of the car,' he said. 'But he's broke a leg and he keeps asking for you. Says it's important. In case he passes out, he says. So can you come at once, sir?'

Mr Drummond turned away before answering. He stood, looking towards the altar, his hands clasped together.

'I've got the car outside,' said Tom, quickly. 'I can drive him down at once. Where is Mount?'

'They've taken him off the road into Mrs Salter's place,' said Mrs Holbrook. 'And they've rung up the ambulance. And Mount's wife 'as been called, and Salter himself won't let no one at him till we get back.'

The vicar turned to them again.

'You go, Seeley,' he said. 'Tell Mount I'll be with him in ten minutes. I—have to take off my cassock, and I have my bicycle here. Go. Go quickly. It must not happen again. *It must not happen again.*'

Before they could speak to him he strode away up the aisle and disappeared into the vestry.

'Come on,' said Tom. 'We can get going, at least.'

But Uncle George was staring at the place where the vicar had disappeared from view.

'I do hope——' he said, and stopped abruptly.

Margaret plucked his sleeve.

'Hurry up, Uncle George,' she said. 'It's urgent!'

He went with her obediently. They piled into the car.

Jack Holbrook in front with Tom, to direct him, Mrs Holbrook in the back with Margaret and Uncle George. The other man said he would walk home.

'What do you hope?' asked Margaret, when they were on their way. 'Something to do with Mr Drummond?'

'Why, yes,' said Uncle George. 'I only hope he understands the risk of what he is going to do.'

Margaret shivered; Mrs Holbrook gave Uncle George one quick look and turned her eyes back to the road.

'He's a good man, the vicar,' she said. 'And he's the minister of the Lord. The Lord God will look after His own.'

'That wasn't exactly what I meant,' said Uncle George. 'But I hope you're right about that, too, of course.'

Mrs Holbrook did not answer this. She remained silent until they were slowing up to stop.

'There's the car that done it,' she said. 'Not that it was his fault, poor man. And Dr Matheson's right behind. He must have been in Shipworth already. He couldn't have come over in the time. Bit of luck, that.'

There was nothing for the Seeleys to do. Dr Matheson was with the injured man, who was pretty badly shocked, but, as a result of the doctor's first-aid treatment, was no longer in acute pain. Mount did not want to see anyone except the vicar.

These messages were brought out of the Salters' house by Jack Holbrook, and relayed to the Seeleys, who stood in the garden, wondering how they could make themselves useful. Uncle George sat in the car at the roadside.

'I'd like you to have a look at the bike, sir,' Jack said to Tom, leading him to one side. 'Of course it's no end mucked about; the front wheel came right off and went under the car, and the forks and frame were buckled

under one wing; 'did the car no good, either, that didn't.'

'I'm not surprised.'

'What I don't understand is the wheel coming off like that.'

'Do you mean it came off before the collision?'

'I do. There wouldn't have been no accident at all if the wheel hadn't come off. The bike began to wobble just as this car come along the road, but Mount was watching the car, naturally, so he didn't look down till the bike was getting out of control. Then he saw the butterfly nut was off and he made a jump for it. Might have got away clean but for the ditch. His left foot went down into it and his weight carried forward.'

Tom nodded, stooping to look at the remains of the bicycle.

'Did they find the nut?' he asked.

'They've not found it yet.'

'It ought to be somewhere on the way. He couldn't have ridden it at all if the nut had been altogether removed. At least it would have collapsed almost at once. The nut must have been loosened.'

'That's what I thought,' Jack Holbrook frowned. 'Tampered with, wouldn't you say, sir? Not likely to part on its own.'

'I shouldn't have thought so. Where does Mount ordinarily keep the bike?'

'Shed at the side of his house. Old lean-to, it is. Along with his garden tools, and that.'

'Not locked up?'

'Not as far as I know, sir.'

Their conversation was interrupted at this point by the vicar, who arrived on his bicycle.

'How is he?' he asked, as he got off.

'Not too bad, I believe,' answered Tom. 'Waiting for you. Dr Matheson is with him and the ambulance from Oldford is due any minute now.'

The vicar went into the cottage, and very soon Dr

Matheson came out, spoke a few words to Jack and the Seeleys, and went away. Almost at once the vicar reappeared.

'I am going to stay here with Mount,' he said. 'So can I ask you to do something for me?' He went on without waiting for an answer. 'Mount is worried about his—work. He wants to let his headquarters in Oldford know about the details of his predicament. So would you very kindly ring up the police station there when you get home? And inform Inspector Ford, particularly, Mount says.'

'Won't the people in the car have done this from here?'

Mr Drummond looked at the forlorn little group of Saturday pleasure-seekers, standing near their damaged car.

'I'll ask them,' he said.

When he came back, he reported that they had, indeed, informed the police in Oldford of Mount's accident, and were actually waiting to give their version of it when reinforcements should arrive.

'But I think, if you wouldn't mind, Mount would prefer you to speak to Ford direct for him,' Mr Drummond concluded. 'He wants most particularly to see the inspector, himself.'

'We'll go back at once,' said Tom, turning towards his own car.

'There is something very much upon his mind,' said the vicar. 'He would be so grateful . . .'

'Tell him not to worry,' said Tom. 'I'll go back right away.'

To Jack Holbrook he said, 'Better keep an eye on the bike. And you might get Mount's kids to look about in their garden, and any other likely place, for that butterfly nut. Anywhere between here and his own place, in fact. Lucky it didn't happen on the steep part of the hill. And that the car was coming up and in low gear.'

'He deserves his' luck,' said Jack. 'After all he's been through, with one thing and another.'

Tom and Margaret went back to their car, where Uncle still sat patiently waiting for them, watching a game of total annihilation played on passing traffic by three small children with toy firearms.

'To kill,' said Uncle George, pleasantly, as they got under way, 'is such a universal, natural urge, it seems. And two out of those three children were girls.'

'Don't,' said Margaret. 'It gets worse and worse. I suppose Mount has found out something, and Mr Drummond knew more than we thought. And Mrs Holbrook and Jack have suspected from the beginning. I wish it would end.'

'I think it must,' said Uncle George. 'Very soon now. I should say. Mrs Holbrook came over to speak to me while you were with her son. She seemed to take it for granted that I knew the whole story. She told me Mount had been to Bankside, and brought away Christopher's coat.'

'Had Miss Osgood got it?' said Margaret, surprised.

'As next of kin, his possessions would be restored to her after the inquest.'

'I bet Mount was looking for stuff to match those shreds on the bit of rope from the loft,' said Tom. 'He can't have concealed his purpose very carefully. Or perhaps he was trying to drive her into the open.'

'A very rash act,' said Uncle George.

'I wish Inspector Ford would arrest her and have done with it!' cried Margaret.

'He will have to have some convincing evidence before he can do that,' said Uncle George. 'We have only some lurid conjectures. They may seem reasonable to us, but I doubt if they would carry much weight with a jury.'

As the car passed Bankside on the way back to Fairlawn they all instinctively turned their heads in its direction. There was no one in the garden, nothing moved there

not even Miss Osgood's small white and tan mongrel, Spot.

So they went back to Fairlawn and Margaret, still subdued and anxious, made tea. Nobody felt like eating. But Uncle George, rousing himself with an effort, entertained them for more than an hour with descriptions of people he had met on his recent holiday in France and Italy, and anecdotes about his housekeeper and her husband.

After that, when he had decided to go back to London, and while Margaret looked up the local trains in the autumn time-table, he went quietly to the telephone and rang up, first the Oldford General Hospital, and secondly the Oldford C.I.D.

'Both answers satisfactory,' he reported. 'Constable Mount's leg is in plaster, and he is quite comfortable. And Inspector Ford is still not at the Station. Which means either he doesn't want to speak to me, or he is genuinely out on a job. Which may well bring him here, though that is pure guess-work. I think in any case that our part in this business is now over.'

But Uncle George was wrong. As the car, again threading the country lanes towards the station, came into view of Bankside, it was apparent, even in the gathering dusk, that an unusual number of people were standing close together near the gate. Tom slowed down and stopped. Without a word, they all got out and walked up to the gate, and as they did so the church bells began to peal; the bell-ringers were practising.

'Are they really waiting at the house?' Margaret whispered, as they crossed the road. 'Or are they gathering for church?'

'On Saturday? More likely for the pub,' said Uncle George.

Bankside, as they approached the gate, looked as deserted as when they had passed it two hours before, but the former silence was broken now by barks and howls from inside the house.

'Looks as if she's done a bunk at last,' said Tom.

'What are we going to do?' asked Margaret, faintly.

'Ring the bell,' said Uncle George. 'Someone will have to attend to that dog. It's quite hysterical.'

The group near the gate drew closer as the Seeleys opened it and went inside.

'There's no one at home,' said one of them.

'Are you sure?' Margaret called back.

'The dog . . .' said another of them, and stopped, and looked at his neighbours.

'That's why they are waiting,' said Tom, as they continued up the path. 'To see if she'll let it out. Or if she's gone away and left it shut up.'

'She couldn't be letting it howl its head off like that if she was at home,' said Margaret.

'Perhaps it objects to the church bells,' suggested Tom.

'She told me it makes a fuss if she's away.'

Uncle George pressed the bell-push. The bell rang clearly inside the house, and the dog stopped its howling abruptly, only to break out again a moment later in fierce barks and growls.

Uncle George lifted his hand to ring again, but at that moment the gate clicked behind them and looking round, they saw Mrs Drummond on the path.

She went up to them with a very surprised look on her face.

'Is anything the matter?' she asked, quickly.

'We saw people outside,' answered Margaret. 'So we stopped the car. The dog was making such a terrible noise.'

'Spot always hates strangers,' said Mrs Drummond.

'No. Before we rang the bell. Before we even opened the gate. Howling. I think Miss Osgood must be out, but the dog sounded so upset . . .'

'Laura always waits for me,' said Mrs Drummond, crossly. 'She never goes up to the church before I call. We always go together on Saturday evening. To arrange the prayer books for Sunday.'

Uncle George turned to the bell-push again.

'You needn't ring,' said Mrs Drummond. 'The door won't be locked.'

'Not if she's out?' asked Tom.

'But I've told you she always waits for me. She must be upstairs getting ready, and hasn't heard. Let me.'

But this time the door was locked. Mrs Drummond stood looking at it in silent fury, mixed with alarm. She rattled the door knob, lifted the letter box to look into the hall, called 'Laura' through it once or twice, but only succeeded in making the dog charge down the hall and fling himself at the door, where he bounced up and down in quite maniacal rage.

'She really must have gone on ahead,' said Mrs Drummond, helplessly.

Uncle George, who had also peeped through the letter-box, stood upright.

'I think you'd better go in, Tom,' he said, 'if only to rescue the dog. The ground-floor window is partly open.'

'You can't,' said Mrs Drummond, indignantly, but broke off as she saw her husband at the gate.

'What on earth are you doing here?' she gasped. 'You'll be dreadfully late for your confirmation class. Laura isn't . . .'

By now Tom had climbed through the window and made his way into the hall.

'I hope Spot won't eat him,' said Margaret, anxiously.

The barking, which had risen again in an hysterical crescendo, broke off in a yelp of pain.

'Tom seems to be armed,' said Uncle George. 'And Spot has agreed to an armistice.'

The front door opened. Tom stood inside. The others went in past him.

'I'm sure she's gone on ahead,' said Mrs Drummond. 'Though I can't think why she didn't let me know.'

'Gone,' echoed Tom, coming out of the last of the ground-floor rooms. He had a letter in his hand; it was addressed to the vicar, and he handed it over.

But Uncle George had followed Spot, who led the way upstairs. And now he called to Mr Drummond from the landing. For he had found Miss Osgood, and she had indeed escaped. She was in her bedroom, hanged to a hook on the picture-rail, with her feet a bare six inches from the ground.

XIX

FOR a short time there was panic in Miss Osgood's prim cottage. But, thanks to Tom's service-trained nerves, and Uncle George's quick intelligence, order was soon restored, and messages flew out along the telephone wires to all the appropriate people. After that, it was a question of waiting, which was much more difficult.

'I've spoken to Inspector Ford,' said Uncle George, returning from the telephone. 'He was at Oldford. He's coming over. Your class is waiting for you,' he continued gently to the vicar. 'There is nothing you can do here.'

Mr Drummond lifted a haggard face from his hands.

'Her letter,' he said. 'Read it. We may have wronged her. If I thought that my action had driven her to this step, I should never forgive myself. Never.'

Uncle George took a paper from his pocket.

'If you mean this note, which I think you slipped in her letter-box after we saw you at the church, she never read it.'

'Never read it?'

'It was unopened in the letter-box when we got into the house. I took it from there before going upstairs.'

'A note?' said Mrs Drummond, shrilly, snatching it from Uncle George's hand.

She pulled it open, then stood looking blankly from her husband to the others.

'It doesn't make sense!' she exclaimed. '1 Kings, xviii, 38. Just that. Not even signed.'

'Was that all you put?' asked Margaret.

'She would have understood,' said Mr Drummond. 'I

did it to make her confess. I never meant her to . . . kill herself. That is a sure sign of guilt.'

He dropped his face into his hands again, and groaned aloud.

'She does not confess in her letter to you,' said Uncle George, who had just finished reading it. 'She says she has failed in loyalty, and no longer wishes to live. She ought to have trusted her grandfather and let the will go to the lawyers. Her grandfather loved her, but she did not rely on that love: she was afraid to lose Bankside. It goes on about her grandfather's affection, and then she says her lack of faith encouraged evil in others. Here we have Christopher blackmailing her. And a bit about her trying to get the will from his dead body at the hospital. No suggestion that she brought about his death. Extraordinary woman. She really committed suicide, not because she had murdered twice, but because she could not live with her betrayal of her own idea of her grandfather!'

'That's only what she *wrote*,' said Margaret. 'But I bet it was because she failed to kill Mount, and she knew he had discovered that she murdered Christopher. Also Inspector Ford was on the point of proving she killed her mother, too.'

'I don't understand a single word of this!' cried Mrs Drummond. 'I can't bear it! Poor Laura, dead upstairs, and you slander her memory in this cold-blooded fashion . . .'

Mr Drummond took her by the arm.

'My dear,' he said. 'There is much that you do not know, and much that neither of us will ever understand. Come away. My duty is at the church, and our source of comfort is there, too. Come. We cannot be any use here, and the children must be waiting for me.'

They moved towards the door, but as they reached it the vicar turned.

'A strange woman,' he said. 'Do you know, it was she who presented the staircase to the church. Sold capital to do so, and her income was not large before. Was that

atonement, I wonder? A strange, confused being. The family taint, perhaps.'

He went away, shaking his bowed head in his perplexity.

The letter was left in Uncle George's hand. He folded it up carefully, and put it back in the envelope.

'Not a word of the Howard blackmail,' said Tom.

'No. But would you expect it?'

'Why not?'

'She was getting her money back. Blackmailing them with their own blackmail. Incidentally, it would help to repay the conscience money she put into the staircase. A shrewd business move.'

The door bell rang at this point and stopped their discussion. On the doorstep were Inspector Ford and another detective, the police doctor, and two uniformed constables. Also in the group, standing beside the inspector, was Bill Howard, looking grave and pale.

'Bill!' exclaimed Tom and Margaret together.

'You know each other, of course,' said the inspector, and went on without waiting for an answer. 'Mr Howard came forward with some information to-day which confirms the suspicions you brought to me yourselves. It looks as if Miss Osgood realized the game was up.'

Everyone nodded. No one felt inclined to speak.

'We'll go upstairs,' said Inspector Ford. 'Not you, Mrs Seeley.' He turned to Uncle George. 'Perhaps you'd care to explain to her, sir. What you told me.'

'Certainly I will,' said Uncle George. 'I would prefer to stay here on my own account, as well.'

The others trooped upstairs, Tom taking the opportunity to say to Bill in a whisper, 'What did you tell them?'

'Saw the old girl dipping the rug,' Bill whispered back. 'Over the wall, you know. Couldn't think for the life of me what she was doing with an enamel bath and all those tins of weed-killer. Never twigged it till the other day . . .'

They fell silent as they entered the room, and looked away while the police got on with their gruesome task. After the body had been examined and covered Tom ventured to say, 'My wife's uncle has a letter Miss Osgood left for the vicar. It isn't exactly a confession—not a confession of murdering her mother. But it shows every intention of killing herself. She knew she'd been found out, I suppose?'

Inspector Ford stepped closer.

'She may have intended suicide,' he said, 'but she did not commit suicide.'

Bill Howard laughed shortly.

'Mistaken identity?' he said. 'I'd have sworn that was Laura Osgood, myself.'

'She is dead,' said the inspector. 'But she did not hang herself. She was strangled.'

There was movement in the room. The constables slipped to the door. Bill Howard moved one pace and stopped.

'When you strung her up to the picture rail, Howard,' said the inspector, 'you should have used a running knot, not a bowline, that won't slip. Same with the builders' rope you tied Christopher Osgood with. You like the bowline, don't you? After all these years, you haven't forgotten your early training at sea.'

Bill Howard leaped at his accuser, but he was quickly overpowered.

'Alfred Barnes,' began Inspector Ford. 'alias William Howard, alias Anthony Brentford, alias Robert Oldland . . .'

The charge went on, while Tom Seeley stood like a stone, overcome with amazement.

'Bill!' he exclaimed, when the arrested man had been removed. 'Bill a murderer! A double . . . don't tell me a *triple* murderer!'

'Oh no,' said the inspector. 'We think Miss Osgood was responsible for her mother's death.'

'How long have you suspected Bill?'

'I'm afraid you'll have to wait, sir, before you hear the details of that.'

Christmas had come and gone. The Seeley boys had enjoyed the usual round of local parties, excursions to the circus at Olympia, and the theatre in London. The spring term had begun and peace had returned to Fairlawn. Uncle George paid his first visit there of the new year.

'How do you like your new neighbours?' he asked.

'Do you mean the Bruces who bought Fairholme, which, by the way, they are calling The Leas, or do you mean the Willises in the Howards' old house?'

'I was thinking of the Howards.'

'Oh, the new people are very pleasant. They aren't snoopers, and they haven't complained that the boys are too noisy—so far.'

Margaret broke off and sighed.

'You know we haven't really got over the Howards, yet. It was one thing to work out a possible crime that happened two years ago. But it was quite another to find you'd been living next door to a man who was not only a professional crook, but actually plotting and carrying out murders at the time.'

'I don't know how he thought he'd get away with it?' said Tom.

'At first,' answered Uncle George, 'he obviously thought if any awkward questions arose he'd put it on to Miss Osgood. He'd guessed her guilt over her mother. He'd actually seen her rinsing the rug in the chlorate.'

'Wasn't that a very chancy way of trying to kill her mother?' said Margaret. 'It might not have worked.'

'No. But she wasn't going to do anything direct if she could help it. If the chlorate hadn't worked, she'd have tried something else. She probably hoped her mother's heart would give out first, and spare her guilt.'

'Did Bill blackmail her on that?'

'No. I don't think so. You see, he was interested in

Chris Osgood. He knew all about him, and we know now that Chris was in the habit of dropping in on the Howards for drinks, because, if you remember, Miss Osgood was a teetotaller, and had none in her house.'

'Yes,' said Tom. 'We might have realised it wouldn't be Laura who had filled him up with the whisky barbiturate mixture.'

'No. That was Bill Howard.'

'I'm glad it came out at the trial, all about the will,' said Margaret. 'If Bill hadn't tried to use it for his defence we would never have been sure. But he actually followed Chris when he came into our home to get the will back from the staircase, and then he saw Miss Osgood also shadowing, and knew Chris had seen her waiting in the dark near the front door, which was why he went out by the cellar. Only he dropped the will there.'

'After that it was obvious Chris had lost something, because he came back twice. So Bill had a go at the cellar, himself. Several goes. We suspected he had, because of the moss, but we couldn't think what he was doing it for. Actually just shadowing Chris.'

'Which of them stole it from my brief-case?' asked Uncle George.

'Oh, I don't think there is any doubt that was Christopher. Bill could not have been on the train. He was talking to Margaret over the wall.'

'Of course.'

'And then the blackmail started.'

They were silent for a time, then Margaret spoke.

'I never told you about Buffy's confession, did I? She wanted to confide in me, the day after Bill's arrest. She was half crazy. I'm sure she had no idea about the murders. So I took her to Inspector Ford, and she wouldn't say a thing unless I was allowed to stay. We were right in thinking she found and kept the second copy of the will. After Chris began his blackmail she and Bill started theirs, following suit while the going was good. It must have been at that point that Bill thought he'd prefer

not to share. Buffy knew nothing. Bill arranged the fire and made Chris tight, and took him up into the loft and tied him up with Alf's rope.'

'We were silly to think Miss Osgood could have hauled up a dead weight like Christopher on that rope. Alf said it wouldn't take the strain; of course it wouldn't.'

'Nor would he have come round again if he'd been flat out at that stage.'

'Besides,' said Margaret, 'we realised afterwards, if Miss Osgood had been away all that time Spot would have been howling the place down. He did, that first time we were visited. I heard a dog howling in the distance, then. So we know Bill was speaking the truth about her being there.'

Uncle George nodded.

'Also the inspector found that Alf's rope would not have been long enough for the complicated work with the derrick, besides being half rotten. That disposed of our theory, which, incidentally, Bill put forward himself. Then there was your evidence that their light was on, after the fire, but they had not come over to help.'

'It was easy enough for Bill to nip backwards and forwards over the garden wall. It was really too far for Miss Osgood, in the time, not counting Spot's agitation.'

'We should have thought of that, too.'

Uncle George accepted a fresh cigarette.

'You aren't detectives,' he said. 'I thought the Oldford police did very well on the whole. From the moment your Alf gave Mount the rope with the metal ring Mount was gunning for Miss Osgood. The whole village had a down on her. But that ring gave them their chief clue at Oldford; when they got a finger-print off it that was in the records.'

'To think that Bill Howard had taken us all in for so long.'

'It was his profession. Extraordinary people. Two years as a rating, and he gets dismissed the service for stealing an officer's uniform and going about in it ashore. After

that, confidence tricks, more impostures, getting money out of old women. His wife knew what he was up to, though she always believed he'd been a real officer. Apparently he was in uniform when he picked her up at the stage door of a provincial music-hall.'

'A devilishly plausible pair,' said Tom. 'It makes you think.'

'It does indeed,' said Uncle George.

'And I must say I was extremely thankful to hear the list of aliases rattle out when he was charged,' Tom added.

'So was I, when I heard them,' agreed Margaret. She waited a minute and then said, 'He would never have been accused of Chris's murder if he had not killed Miss Osgood.'

'He never was,' said Tom. 'He was tried and hanged for Miss Osgood.'

'Why did he kill her? She said nothing about him, not even about the blackmail, in her letter to the vicar.'

'Obviously,' said Uncle George, 'he wanted it to look like a suicide. He had tried to stop Mount: he had been going into Bankside when Mount came out with Christopher's coat. Ford told you that, didn't he?'

'Yes. Anyway, he knew the police were coming fairly often to Fairlawn. He wanted to throw guilt on Miss Osgood for both murders, and he wanted to stop her reversing the blackmail.'

'Of course. But he wasn't very clever. Why use a bow-line? The last knot in the world for hanging anyone.'

'A little knowledge, etc.,' said Uncle George, 'and a lot of vanity. Don't forget he was at sea for two years. Just long enough to pick up a few things without understanding them. Probably knew two or three knots and prided himself on them.'

'Anyway, they found enough evidence under Miss Osgood's finger-nails to convict him twice over,' said Tom. brutally.

'Oh, don't!' said Margaret. 'I'd rather forget that.'

'Strange,' mused Uncle George. 'She murdered her

mother and she suffered the penalty of the law for murder. Or something very like it. Death by strangulation.'

'Our Mrs Holbrook would see the hand of God in that,' said Tom.

'She did,' said Margaret. 'The day after the inquest on Miss Osgood she said to me, "it was only to be expected her sins would find her out. Praise be the Lord! "'

